

IMAGINING THE READER
VERNACULAR REPRESENTATION AND SPECIALIZED
VOCABULARY IN MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

James T. Walther, B.A., M.A.

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APPROVED:

Thomas Preston, Major Professor
Brenda Sims, Committee Member
Jacqueline Vanhoutte, Committee Member
Lynn Eubank, Chair of Graduate Studies in
English
C. Neal Tate, Dean of the Robert B.
Toulouse School of Graduate Studies

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William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman* was probably the first medieval English poem to achieve a national audience because Langland chose to write in the vernacular and he used the specialized vocabularies of his readership to open the poem to them. During the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, writers began using the vernacular in an attempt to allow all English people access to their texts. They did so consciously, indicating their intent in prologues and envois when they formally address readers. Some writers, like Langland and the author of *Mankind*, actually use representatives of the rural classes as primary characters who exhibit the beliefs and lives of the rural population.

Anne Middleton's distinction between public—the readership an author imagined—and audience—the readership a work achieved—allows modern critics to discuss both public and audience and try to determine how the two differed. While the public is always only a presumption, the language in which an author writes and the cultural events depicted by the literature can provide a more plausible estimate of the public.

The vernacular allowed authors like Gower, Chaucer, the author of *Mankind*, and Langland to use the specialized vocabularies of the legal and rural communities to discuss societal problems. They also use representatives of the communities to further open the

texts to a vernacular public. These open texts provide some representation for the rural and common people's ideas about the other classes to be heard.

Langland in particular uses the specialized vocabularies and representative characters to establish both the faults of all English people and a common guide they can follow to seek moral lives through Truth. His rural character, Piers the Plowman, allows rural readers to identify with the messages in the text while showing upper class and educated readers that they too can emulate a rural character who sets a moral standard.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman* was probably the first medieval English poem to achieve a national audience. Clerical and lay readers formed a single readership, allowing *Piers Plowman* to achieve a greater but similar audience to other alliterative poetry. How was the poem able to achieve this national readership? The answer involves the implications resulting from Langland's choice of the vernacular, English, over Latin.

Latin, for medieval writers, was the standard language. Most documents written by the Church, for the government, or for the law were written in Latin. It was a standardized language, able to adapt to technological and societal changes while remaining fixed in grammar, pronunciation, and meaning.¹ Writing in Latin also allowed the Church to communicate across the national boundaries in Europe, for while the vernaculars differed, Latin remained constant. Scholars used Latin for the same reason: they needed a universal language so that people from other countries could read their writings. Through this universal and fixed language, writers could establish a reputation for themselves, creating themselves as *auctores*.

¹For a discussion of standardized languages versus vernaculars, see Chapter Three, where I discuss the difference through Dick Leith's definitions. See also Dick Leith, *A Social History of English* (London: Routledge, 1983).

Even though Latin was important to the medieval world, it restricted the transmission of texts to a small group of readers. Clerical and scholarly audiences had access to the texts and their meanings, but most of the laity could neither read them nor understand the texts when they were read aloud. Many members of the lay population could, however, read their vernacular.² And in England, these lay readers knew the value of writing.

The 1381 Rebellion, once known as the Peasant's Revolt, illustrates the importance the rebels placed on writing. During their attacks, the members of the rebellion, including rural people, tradespeople, and some land owners, searched for documents, killing lawyers and clerks and forcing clerks to rewrite charters to favor the rebels after they had destroyed the originals.³ Yet while the rebels knew the value of

²I discuss lay literacy in Chapter Two. For a complete discussion, see M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* 2 ed (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

³Steven Justice further shows the importance the rebels placed on writing when he discusses letters their leaders carried. These letters, he notes, contain direct references to *Piers Plowman*, both through reflected lines and character names. See Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 13-66. By using these references, the letters show that their writers were familiar with *Piers Plowman* and suggest that the poem was well known to many members of the rebellion. The prominent characters and the poem's themes formed a part of the rebels ideological

writing, they did not fully understand it as a technology. Their forced revision of documents indicates that they believed those new documents could replace the old ones because they were written. Those in power, however, had lawyers and scribes replace the originals once the rebellion was over, and the documents demanded by the rebels were ineffectual.

Because the rebels were primarily illiterate by medieval standards and because they ultimately lost their fight, they did not create lasting documents detailing their side of the rebellion. In “The Writing Lesson of 1381,” Susan Crane notes that the rebels of the 1381 Rebellion “remain outside representation [in historical documents] in that they do not represent themselves for the written record. They are imagined by those who write.”⁴ As Justice explain, those imagined depictions of the rebels show unreasoning brutes whose demands were lawless (18 ff). According to the documents, the rebels killed without restraint, destroyed property and documents, and tried to abandon those who had lawfully and divinely been placed in ruling positions. In the *Vox Clamantis*, John Gower actually describes the rebels turning into beasts during the rising, and in doing so he

horizon of expectations. As I discuss in other chapters, the letters indicate a broader reception of the poem than previously imagined and potentially widen both Langland’s public and audience.

⁴Susan Crane, “The Writing Lesson of 1381,” *Chaucer’s England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992) 201.

All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

shows the common opinion among medieval people that those without reason are no longer human.⁵

While the lower classes were not represented in the historical documents about the rebellion, writers were beginning to represent them in literature. During the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, writers began using the vernacular in an attempt to allow all English people access to their texts. They do so consciously, indicating their intent in prologues and envois when they formally address their readers. Some writers, like Langland and the author of *Mankind*, actually use representatives of the rural classes as their primary characters. These characters exhibit the beliefs and lives of the rural population, and the authors use them to unite their readers in a search for new morality.

Before focusing on the language writers used to indicate their readership, I discuss lay literacy and provide and expand modern scholars definition of medieval literacy, which is the subject of Chapter Two. Rather than accepting the medieval definition of literacy—the ability to read and write in fluent Latin—or our modern definition of literacy—the ability to read and write in the vernacular—I adopt Clanchy’s idea that modern

⁵John Gower, *The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and The Tripartite Chronicle*, trans. Eric Stockton (Seattle, U of Washington P, 1962). Instead of using Stockton’s translated title *The Voice of One Crying*, however, I use the Latin *Vox Clamantis*. As I discuss in Chapter Four and Five, Gower uses the description of the rebels as beasts to gain his audience’s trust. He shows the beliefs of those harmed by the rebellion in order to help them accept his later criticisms of their own actions.

critics should determine medieval literacy as the ability to read the vernacular.

Furthermore, I expand Clanchy's definition to include those who could hear the literature read. These people could also receive texts, though orally transmitted, and so they form what I call the orally literate, thus adding to the definition of medieval literacy. This broadened definition of medieval literacy allows modern scholars to see that more people potentially had access to the written word.

After defining literacy, I briefly discuss how authors used the vernacular to indicate their readership. At this point, I discuss current criticism on medieval literature and adopt Anne Middleton's distinction between public—the readership an author imagined—and audience—the readership a work achieved.⁶ This distinction allows modern critics to discuss both public and audience and try to determine how the two differed and what this implies. Middleton believes that determining the public is difficult and always only a presumption. I show, however, that the language in which an author writes and the cultural events depicted by the literature can provide a more plausible estimate of the public. Modern scholars can examine the ideas, historical allusions, and specific terms authors used to predict the readers for whom they wrote. While developing my expanded definition of public, I discuss Hans Robert Jauss, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Pavel Medvedev's philosophies of literary criticism to show how the horizon of expectations, ideological

⁶Anne Middleton, "The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*," *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background*, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1982) 101-102.

horizons, and my term, the ideological horizon of expectations, can help show modern readers the public of medieval writers.⁷

In Chapter Three, I discuss standardized languages and vernaculars, focusing on the desire of medieval authors to use the vernacular rather than Latin. Middle English prologues often show how authors used the vernacular to open their texts, and the proliferation of devices like prologues and envois shows that the authors felt that they needed to justify writing in English. Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is one of the first medieval texts devoted to defending an author's native language. And he wrote it in Latin to justify to scholars that the vernacular was suitable for literary efforts.

A sampling of prologues from medieval English writers shows that their desire to write in the vernacular was based on their attempts to establish English as a standardized language and to open their texts to a wider readership. As I discuss the prologues, I show how the authors consciously address the educated portion of their public in order to justify writing the work in the vernacular, primarily for those who could not understand Latin. This conscious effort to write in English also invokes feelings of patriotism,

⁷Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, *Theory of History and Literature*, vol 2 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982); Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Pavel N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. White (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978). All other citations will be documented parenthetically.

perhaps showing the effects of England's European wars and the desire of writers to develop nationalism through their poetry.

While Chapter Three focuses on vernaculars and how writers used language to indicate public, Chapter Four discusses one result of authors writing in the vernacular: the ability of vernacular authors to use representatives of the legal profession and their specialized vocabulary to further indicate public. Authors like Gower, Chaucer, the author of *Mankind*, and Langland use legal vocabulary and depictions of the legal community to discuss problems within the law. Gower writes in Latin, closing the text to vernacular readers but allowing him to be critically honest with his Latin readers. The other authors use the vernacular, and by doing so they open the text and its criticisms to vernacular readers. These open texts provide some representation for the rural and common people, an opportunity for their ideas about the other classes to be heard.

In Chapter Five, I continue to examine specialized vocabularies, showing how the same authors also use rural vocabulary and representative characters to further open the text to vernacular readers. Langland uses a combination of the rural vocabulary and rural representation to establish both the faults of all English people and a common guide they can follow to seek moral lives through Truth. His rural character, Piers, allows rural readers to identify with the messages in the text while showing upper class and educated readers that they too can emulate a rural character who sets a moral standard.

These specialized vocabularies allow authors to target a portion of their public because those who use the terms have an intimate relationship with the meaning. Other

people who read a work might recognize the term, but those who use a term in their daily lives possess a fuller meaning of it. The vocabularies combined with the vernacular also open the texts and allow access to all English readers. Certain vocations might find more meaning in terms from their profession, but all readers could understand the language and read the messages present, whether patriotic, moral, or critical.

While my discussion of specialized vocabularies in medieval literature ends with the rural vocabulary, I show the potential of this critical approach in the Afterword. Ecclesiastical, noble, and mercantile vocabularies all appear in medieval works, including *Piers Plowman*. Further research into these specialized vocabularies can show medieval authors including more people in their publics. Identifying the terms of specialized vocabularies will further define the medieval vernacular public and help modern critics understand for whom medieval writers were writing. The results will, I believe, help provide readers with a more complete and appreciative understanding of both medieval imaginative works and the people who “read” them.

CHAPTER 2

THE VERNACULAR AS INDICATIVE OF AUDIENCE EXPECTATION

By examining the language in which medieval authors choose to write, modern readers can begin to predict the readership these authors projected for their works. Medieval English authors had three languages to choose from when writing—Latin, French, and English. Latin was the language used by the clergy, the legal community, and people formally educated by the Church. French was the language used by the aristocracy and the law, and used to exclude the lower classes. English, however, was the native language of the clergy, the legal community, and of the nobility. It was also the only language most common people understood, especially those who had not received any education. Medieval authors who chose English opened their texts to readers of the vernacular and the uneducated populace of England who could hear the vernacular texts read. In doing so, the authors expanded their potential readership and allowed any messages in their texts to be transmitted to all English people rather than a limited elite.

A problem immediately arises when critics mention the vernacular. While people often use the term “vernacular,” it is rarely defined, not only allowing critics to use it as they wish but also allowing readers to interpret it differently. The vagueness of “vernacular” gives it play, allowing people to both use it and interpret it differently which can cause problems with interpretation. In order to limit the play involved, medieval

vernacular herein means primarily a language other than that commonly used for written purposes. For many medieval writers, a language not commonly accepted in writing meant using their native language rather than Latin; for medieval English writers, this meant using English rather than Latin or French.

The vernacular allowed authors to reach a wider audience than writing in Latin or French. Yet the breadth of that audience has often been limited by modern critics who assume that an audience for a written work must be literate, and then show that few people, primarily the clergy, nobility, and legal community, were literate. But the medieval definition of literacy, to be *litteratus*, dictated that a person had to be able to read and write fluent Latin, which was later broadened to include French. It did not include a person's native language.

M.T. Clanchy traces writing in England from the Norman conquest of England to the end of Edward I's reign, showing how the number and types of documents grew during this time.¹ In his book, Clanchy discusses the medieval definition of literacy—the

¹M.T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993). All subsequent citations will be documented parenthetically. While Clanchy's work ends before the period I am discussing, his research provides important insight into the probable literacy of medieval England in the vernacular. *From Memory to Written Record* also details the increase in production of written documents, whether governmental or literary, which helped justify later writers' desire to write in the vernacular.

ability to read and write in Latin, and shows how “literates were expected to function primarily as believers in Christian scripture” and to instruct laity in scripture while interpreting but restricting the meaning (13). In this situation, Latin literacy was used to denote class but also to restrict knowledge. As Jesse Gellrich notes, “anyone who has explored the reception of writing in the middle ages has confronted the fact that it was often the occasion of contest, if not outright collision, between different segments of society.”²

Although members of the clergy and some members of the nobility were learning Latin in clerical schools, Clanchy shows that domestic instruction in the vernacular also occurred. The extent of the instruction, however, is impossible to measure fully (13). Clanchy’s primary importance to my study is his observation that “this is not to say that everyone could read and write by 1307, but that by that time *literate modes* were familiar even to serfs” [emphasis mine] (2). Because people were familiar with literate modes—in the form of charters, writs, proclamations, and liturgical manuals—modern critics can see that the medievals at least recognized the importance and power of literacy. These literate modes were transmitted to them orally by members of their household or village who could read. Because they could hear the literate modes read, I consider them to have an “oral literacy,” a literacy that allows people access to written works through another’s

²Jesse M. Gellrich, *Discourse and Dominion in the Fourteenth Century: Oral Contexts of Writing in Philosophy, Politics, and Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995)

18. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

voice. In church, this might occur through the priest reading from the Bible in Latin then translating and interpreting the passage; in such a case, the interpretation is most important, for it followed Christian ideology. In the cases of laws, writs, or other public documents, what people heard was more literal, though the documents had to have been translated at some point. In the case of vernacular poetry, listeners heard what was written, then the entire “reading group” could discuss the poetry.

Because people were reading texts aloud and a wider audience received them, authors were able to use literature to comment on society. In *Medieval Readers and Writers: 1350-1400*, Janet Coleman discusses literacy and readership in medieval English poetry, showing that “written poetry was being used with increasing frequency as one important means of broadcasting general attitudes to poverty and labour, to the theoretically fixed social hierarchy, to corruption among the ruling classes and the clergy.”³ The production of the vernacular literature allowed those who could hear it to understand and to see their ideas reflected in writing. Authors could use their writing to show the English people the problems of the country. Because the common people could understand the writing, they could find their perceptions of society reflected by the literature. And because the vernacular writers were writing for a readership that included oral readers, they began to use more elements of oral thought in their writing.⁴

³Janet Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers: 1350-1400* (New York: Columbia UP, 1981) 56. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

⁴Elements of oral thought include that it is “additive rather than subordinative, ...

One way writers introduced oral elements into their writing was by reviving oral forms of literature. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, for example, many poets began reviving alliterative poetry, poetry that contained oral elements and could and did reflect the ideas of the common people of England. During the Anglo-Saxon period, alliterative poetry documented the history of the people, their heroes, and their way of life. The poetry was also popular because alliteration, an oral device, makes memorizing and forming the poetry orally easier.⁵ The alliterative revival of the fourteenth and

redundant or ‘copious,’ ... close to the human lifeworld, ... agonistically toned, ... empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced, ... and situational rather than abstract.” Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982; London: Routledge, 1988) 37-49.

⁵Walter Ong shows that “In an oral culture, restriction of words to sound determines not only modes of expression but also thought processes. . . . You know what you can recall” (33). He further shows that “In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence” (34). Alliteration is a form of mnemonic patterning, and as Ong explains “Fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions of this sort and of other sorts can be found occasionally in print . . . but in oral cultures they are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself. Thought in any extended form is impossible without them, for it consists in them.” (35).

fifteenth centuries prospered for similar reasons—the poetry was easier for people who were not adept readers to read or to hear read. Alliterative poems were popular among the laity, for the people were not proficient readers; alliterative poetry was written in the vernacular for a similar reason: those who needed the mnemonic device of alliteration were able to understand English, not Latin or French. *Piers Plowman* was part of the alliterative revival and thus could be understood by the laity. It gained a larger audience than other alliterative poems perhaps because of its themes—improving society through reforming the Church and nobility. Common people perceived these institutions to be corrupt, as seen through imaginative examples like *Piers Plowman* and *The Canterbury Tales* and through didactic works like *Vox Clamantis*. A vernacular poem speaking about changing that corruption would have been attractive to an orally literate readership.

The poets of the alliterative revival chose to use both alliteration and the vernacular. The choice to use the vernacular immediately creates a different public for the work than for one written in Latin. *Piers Plowman* and John Gower's *Vox Clamantis*, two contemporary works, show the difference clearly, and thus provide an interesting perspective on the vernacular versus Latin issue. *Piers Plowman* was written in the vernacular and revised before the 1381 Rebellion and revised again afterward showing Langland's objection to the interpretation his achieved readership gave the poem.⁶ The *Vox Clamantis*, written in Latin, was written before the rebellion as an attempt by Gower

⁶William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent, 1987).

to prescribe the way all classes would behave.⁷ After the rebellion, Gower added Book I as a prologue. In this book, Gower depicts the members of the rebellion as peasants turned into animals. Since he is writing in Latin and his primary audience is the upper class and clergy, Gower can use this language as a rhetorical device to gain his public's approval before he chastises them. His audience evidently approved because the *Vox Clamantis* and his other works survived and he continued to live as a court poet. His work achieved a limited readership, the nobility and clergy, but they were his intended public and Latin was his obvious choice of a language. Writing in the vernacular would have widened his potential audience too much, and Latin was an easy way to limit access to his criticism of the upper classes.

Wendy Scase, in "Writing and the Plowman: Langland and Literacy," suggests that Langland, through *Piers Plowman*, is showing literacy as not intended only for the "middle-class," but for others as well.⁸ She continues by adding that "many features of the

⁷John Gower, *The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and The Tripartite Chronicle*, trans. Eric Stockton (Seattle, U of Washington P, 1962). Instead of using Stockton's translated title *The Voice of One Crying*, however, I use the Latin *Vox Clamantis*.

⁸Wendy Scase, "Writing and the Plowman: Langland and Literacy," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 9 (1995) 125. All further references will be documented parenthetically. For a complete discussion of the new middle class, see Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers: 1350-1400*. 22-26 ff.

poem imply an audience hearing the text read rather than a readership seeing it" (127). To prove this statement, Scase cites Langland's textual references to "here," meaning the poem, showing that Langland uses locating devices, which are elements of oral presentation. Scase also explains that the manuscripts themselves indicate reading aloud. Some manuscripts, she notes are large, suggesting reading aloud, while others are small, annotated, and decorated with rubrics, suggesting a single reader studying them (129). Because the larger manuscripts were meant to be read aloud, other people besides the reader had access to the text. They were oral readers, possibly orally literate.

Adding the idea of oral literacy to the modern definition of medieval literacy can help determine how texts were transmitted and who received them. Clanchy broadens the modern idea of medieval literacy by stating that access to writing suggests a form of literacy. Because literate modes were familiar to most people during the thirteenth century, Clanchy suggests that they had some form of literacy. Thirteenth-century English people did not necessarily meet current or even medieval ideas of literacy, for as Clanchy writes, "The fact that many—perhaps most—people in thirteenth century England had to read from time to time does not mean that they also wrote. In manuscript culture reading and writing were separate skills"(47). Instead, reading was paired with dictating, and writing was a specialized talent requiring training and expensive materials (125). Because reading and dictating were grouped together, reading aloud was common, and thus a way to expand our definition of literacy, or the transmission of writing, to more people. Clanchy notes that "Medieval texts were designed to be read in a variety of ways—orally

or silently, by one person or in a group—and at different levels of meaning, taking account of word and image and a variety of linguistic registers” (195). And because the literature was contemplated and discussed to find every meaning it held, we can assume that even those who could not read had access to the texts and their full meanings.

Literacy for the purposes of my argument includes those who could read English and their friends and family members who could hear something read. This definition implies a widespread English literacy rate, while a lower rate existed for French, and an even lower one for Latin. Authors had the three languages to choose from, and which they chose depended on their intended readership; any writer choosing to write in English would know that the readership would be far ranging rather than limited to those considered *litteratus*. This broad vernacular readership included the burgeoning “middle class” and members of the rural communities. These groups were traditionally classified as illiterate by the Church and noble institutions, but through the proliferation of vernacular writing, they gradually were accepted as literate.

Piers Plowman: Critics’ View of Public And Audience

The readership of a medieval work is difficult—perhaps impossible—to determine. Modern research can show a possible readership, deduced from existing texts and any references to those texts in other documents; similarly, research can extrapolate from textual and manuscript information and create a plausible if not actual readership for a work. Critics can also use authorial location, based on dialect; the language the author

chose; and evidence from historical documents to show how the work affected the time. These techniques can identify who was reading the medieval texts, the author's achieved audience. While discussing the achieved audience is important, "there is an important sense in which 'audiences' do not preexist the texts that are addressed to them but are called into being by them."⁹ Determining the author's intended audience is more difficult than determining an achieved readership. "Much of the evidence for actual audiences is lacking or has to be reconstructed from codicological research and close textual investigation" (*Idea of the Vernacular* 111), so modern readers must turn to historical documents—whether other creative works, letters, or legal texts—that mention the work in question. Modern readers can also begin to recreate the intended audience by looking at specific references to readers or patrons by the author and by looking at the language used in two ways—whether or not it was the vernacular and what style and vocabulary the author used.

Paul Strohm notes that Chaucer, in *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, explains how he will write the explanatory text, using a plain style and explaining difficult concepts. Strohm suggests that by stating this purpose, Chaucer is showing that "a successful artist adapts both content and style to the requirements and capacity of the intended

⁹*The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999) 110. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

audience.”¹⁰ Authors and readers both must adapt to what the other needs, but authors must do so more—the achieved audience will determine the final interpretation of the work, and the author must predict this when writing for the intended audience.

In the introduction to *Medieval Readers and Writers: 1350-1400*, Janet Coleman writes that during the latter half of the fourteenth century “we can distinguish a genre of didactic literature whose aim seems to have been the education of its audience in the matter of current theological, political, and ethical interests” (15). Through this actively didactic literature, modern readers can see authors trying to communicate with their audiences. And authors who wished to expand their audiences could do so by writing in the vernacular.

Coleman observes that Chaucer, Gower, the *Gawain*-poet, and Langland historicize characters so people can see themselves through them (16). More importantly, they can see their lives refracted by the characters as the authors show their readers how they *should* live their lives. Coleman “argues that relatively few works were meant to entertain but were intended rather to instruct, exhort and, ultimately, to inspire readers to criticize and eventually to reform social practice” (16). Her argument is certainly valid as the literature tried to develop the “public voice of . . . the population,” and it was “a literature that did not merely passively reflect its time and context but was written as an encouragement to critique and change” (17). The literature did entertain as well, however, as its popularity in the culture indicates.

¹⁰Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989) 48.

Because of the increase in vernacular writing, Coleman suggests that Chaucer and Gower shared a readership wider than the nobility modern readers tend to imagine (21). Langland's readership was broader than Chaucer's, Gower's, or many other fourteenth century authors, for he uses Latin only in biblical or patristic passages and does not use the inflated literary style—often based on words adopted from Latin and French—that Chaucer and Gower use. As Coleman shows, “Writing in a less formal style, Langland developed a vocabulary that could cope with contemporary theological and social issues, and he thereby influenced later writers of the southern half of the century who were themselves to deal with religious and social reform” (43). This statement follows her discussion of the differences between spiritual works, written in a dialectical vocabulary, and entertaining works, written in a technical, alliterative, inflated vocabulary (42). While Coleman later explains that “didactic, social and religious commentary” in poetry reflected “the prevailing mood of the times” (71), she does not acknowledge that these could be used to entertain as well. *Piers Plowman* was able to entertain readers while they received spiritual guidance, a combination that helps explain its popularity.¹¹

¹¹Modern scholarship can determine the popularity of *Piers Plowman* based on the number of manuscripts that survive—second only to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. The number of manuscripts are not a perfect guide, however, for they do not consider how many might have been lost. *Piers Plowman* was popular in rural areas as well as cities, and manuscripts tend to survive in the libraries of wealthy people, not the houses of rural dwellers, so we cannot truly estimate the poem's popularity based on surviving

Like Clanchy, Coleman defines an expanded “lay literacy at the *end* of the fourteenth century” as including “an ability to read and write in English and perhaps in either Latin or French” (24). While Coleman follows this definition with a detailed discussion of schools, the people attending them, and the languages taught at them, her definition is limiting for it does not allow critics to consider *hearing* as a form of literacy. But if, as I think, that the primary purpose of literacy was and is to enable communication—whether through imaginative literature, laws, etc.—then hearing in medieval England should be considered a form of literacy for the purposes of considering textual reception. *Piers Plowman* contains aural devices, like alliteration, detailed description of actions and places, allegorical names (Mede, Fals, Holi Church) for characters, and verbal locators (here, now, there), which all suggest an orally literate

manuscripts. Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, on the other hand, primarily for a learned courtly audience, so naturally more copies would survive. Based on the number of *Piers Plowman* manuscripts to survive given its probable readership, I agree with Nicholas Watson who writes “The most widely read English poet in 1400 was almost certainly not Chaucer but Langland, whose poem, written in an alliterative plain style well adapted for circulation among different social classes across the country, aroused intense interest.” Nicholas Watson, “The Politics of Middle English Writing,” *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999) 348.

audience listening to the poem. The devices help listeners picture and remember the scenes, the characters, and the story line. Listeners cannot immediately reread a passage, as single readers can, so Langland provides these aural clues for his predicted audience.

Coleman writes, “It is also probably wrong to assume that the audience of such literature [*Piers Plowman* and poems written in its tradition] was the ‘peasantry’” (62). She suggests instead that the audience was lower middle class. In doing so, she provides examples (63-64) showing how diverse the middle class was and showing divisions even in smaller towns of rural people into classes. Literacy was the distinguishing characteristic between rural people who had become middle class and those still considered illiterate peasants (63). Because literacy distinguished between the middle class and peasants, Coleman claims, the “literature of complaint . . . does not appear to be the literature of the ‘peasantry’” but instead the literature of the middle class who “displayed sympathies at either end of the spectrum with a strict morality, law and order, religious piety and with quite specific and rigid expectations of how the idealized orders in Church and State ought to behave” (64). Consider, however, that while the “middle class” is a readership for “the literature of complaint,” people who heard the works read can also be added to the definition of literacy. Then, the readership widens to include the ‘peasantry’ as well, creating a huge audience, one that Langland tried to reach and convince to live properly. However, a large audience, composed primarily of oral readers, can easily undermine any didactic argument through misinterpretation. Langland’s readers did so, and his audience found his call for reformation of the nobility and clergy,

but instead of looking to Truth for guidance, they rebelled against the established powers in 1381. Langland revised *Piers Plowman* and eliminated passages the rebels used in support of their cause, showing that he did not intend them to find the meaning they found.¹²

¹²Criticism on *Piers Plowman* has long speculated on who Langland was and whether the same poet who wrote *Piers Plowman* actually revised it. Current research debates the order of the manuscripts, trying to determine whether B precedes A and C and which, if any, was the poet's final version. Most critics, like Malcolm Godden, Anne Middleton, and Wendy Scase refer to the poet as William Langland and mention him as revising the original twice. In "*Piers Plowman's* William Langland: Editing the Text, Writing the Author's Life," John Bowers discusses the complete history of both the poet's eventual identification and of the revisions of the poem. While he calls for current scholars to reexamine the versions to finally determine their order and author, he uses Langland's name throughout and refers to Langland as revising. And as he shows through manuscriptual evidence, most of the changes in the versions probably came from the same author, whether or not he (or she) was named William Langland. For a more detailed discussion of the textual history of *Piers Plowman* and of Langland's authorship, see Malcolm Godden, *The Making of Piers Plowman* (London: Longman, 1990); John Bowers, "*Piers Plowman's* William Langland: Editing the Text, Writing the Author's Life," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 9 (1995) 65-102; and Anne Middleton, "William Langland's 'Kynde Name': Authorial Signature and Social Identity in Late Fourteenth-

Coleman devotes the majority of her book to discussions of the content of fourteenth-century literature and showing the political, spiritual, and social messages included in the poems. She assumes a primarily middle class audience for the vernacular works, however, which does broaden previous interpretations but which does not consider rural listeners. Because of this possible oral readership, modern readers should consider that messages included in literature may be for listeners as well. How the authors show this, however, is seen primarily through vocabulary rather than content.

Like Coleman, Fiona Somerset, in *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England*, examines the choices an author had between Latin and the vernacular and what those choices implied. She quotes a passage from Wyclif and suggest that if he had written it in Latin, only a few people could have read it and may or may not have chosen to act on the church reforms he suggests. Because he wrote it in the vernacular, it “carries the potential for a much further reaching distribution, if not a disembodiment of social power. When made available in the vernacular the tract becomes potentially accessible to every person who can read English, and through those readers to an even wider audience of listeners.”¹³ He chose for his readers all of those literate in the

Century England,” *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990) 15-82.

¹³Fiona Somerset, *Clerical Discourse and Lay Audience in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1998) 5. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

vernacular—including the clergy, nobility, and commoners—rather than those educated in Latin—the clergy, the nobility, and scholars.

In “The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*,” Anne Middleton divides the broad term audience into audience and public, thus creating an important distinction between what we can determine (audience) and what we can at best presume (public). Middleton begins by distinguishing between audience, “that readership actually achieved by the work” that “may be attested by such evidence as the date and location of copies, their place in books and collections, their ownership and transmission by bequest, gift, or purchase, and by comments on the text and references and allusions to it, and uses of it,”¹⁴ and contrasts this with the ‘public,’ readers the composer imagined while creating and writing the work (102). She then describes the relationship between the two terms, showing how both public and audience “make some accommodations in order to achieve this fit between intention and reception” (102). Middleton’s definition, while useful for my subject, discusses only readers and does not consider listeners. Readers who were orally literate would have comprised parts of both the audience and the public. Manuscripts suggest the texts were read aloud, as does what modern scholarship knows about medieval reading practices. And Langland includes aural devices, showing that his public included listeners as well.

¹⁴Anne Middleton, “The Audience and Public of *Piers Plowman*,” *Middle English Alliterative Poetry and Its Literary Background*, ed. David Lawton (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1982) 101-102. All other quotations will be cited parenthetically.

After discussing how audience and public work together in a literary work, Middleton shows that how a text was mentioned in other documents and its manuscript evidence indicate audience, while any formal mention of public or revision indicate the public. The manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*, she writes, “suggest that the clerical and lay readers formed a single kind of audience” that developed more around religious faith than around social class and that the audience seems to be an expansion of those achieved by other alliterative works of the time, not a different or national one (104). Through her discussion, Middleton provides valuable insight into *Piers Plowman*’s achieved audience. However, she discusses the public only briefly, especially ignoring the possibility of determining public through the use of the vernacular, through vocabulary, and through aural devices.

Middleton notes that one of the few ways we can accurately predict a writer’s public is through genre, where the public “is discovered in something like the same way the composer arrived at it, by comparative literary analysis” (102). She then discusses conventions the poem lacks—declarations of intent, prologues at the beginning or between Passus to show intent or public, its patron, or its sources (112). Like Coleman, Middleton discusses the poem’s content, the message for its public and the implied rejection of the audience’s interpretation of the poem evident in Langland’s revisions.

Steven Justice, in *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*, focuses on six letters found on rebel leaders, which he transcribes in Chapter One. He writes:

The mere existence of such texts is extraordinary, and offers extraordinary

opportunities: to understand the thought of a rural revolt and of the rural communities that produced it; to trace what the English vernacular meant to those who were not thought to read; to observe, from a startling angle, the development of vernacular literature, in the more usual and canonical sense of that word.¹⁵

Justice analyzes all six letters, showing who wrote them, who carried them, and how historians of the winning side used them. He also explains their relation to *Piers Plowman*, showing exactly which lines they reflect and how the writers misappropriated the poem. Justice writes, “the kind of reading Ball [a rebel leader] brought to *Piers Plowman* and the kind of writing he took from it, can explain how the rebels could appropriate the poem on their own terms and *at the same time* delegate its central character as the embodiment and authorization of their claims to power” (106). While he shows the single reading and the general rebel interpretation and appropriation of *Piers Plowman*, Justice does not focus on the public and how language can predict it. He describes Langland’s technique throughout the poem as “juxtapos[ing] theological vocabularies and presuppositions that are discontinuous with each other because of the conflicting institutional functions they serve” (113). To take this idea farther, however, provides insight into the audience and public of *Piers Plowman*. Langland does juxtapose the theological vocabularies, but he also combines them, throughout the text, with legal,

¹⁵Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 4. All other citations will be documented parenthetically.

noble, and rural vocabularies. In doing so, Langland creates a work that seems initially disjointed and allows multiple interpretations. By the end of the poem, however, these vocabularies have merged into one, showing Langland's message that no matter one's social class, the way to find salvation is to live rightly, by doing well, doing better, doing best, and following Truth.

Justice does show that "*Piers Plowman* gave the rising a language and a style, an imaginative model of rural articulacy that conferred on empirical language a conceptual unity and a public force" (137). The language, Justice suggests, gave rural people a voice, one they used loudly in 1381. Yet the voice Justice suggests is a written one that gives the people access to a previously foreign and oppressive technology (137-8). I also consider this language a voice, but one that is oral. This allows those members of the community who could hear but not read to actively participate both in the language and in the rebellion.

Establishing Horizons: Jauss, Bakhtin, and Medvedev

Before looking at the vernacular in depth and discussing what authors imply when they choose it over Latin, I will focus on the chief implications—audience and public. Clanchy writes, "Writing is unique among technologies in penetrating and structuring the intellect itself, which makes it hard for scholars, whose own skills are shaped by literacy, to reconstruct the mental changes which it brings about" (185). Yet by acknowledging that those changes exist, modern scholars can reconstruct the mindsets of medieval

authors and readers. Through this reconstruction, both the public and the audience become clearer.

Any discussion of audience, of writers and readers together, immediately begs a discussion of the audience's reception of the text and how the author might have tried to shape it. Authors are part of the readership of the work, for they react as a reader while writing; similarly, audiences, the main body of the readership, also write the work, for they can change its meaning despite the author's intent. Hans Robert Jauss makes a similar distinction in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*.¹⁶ Jauss describes the reader as "the addressee for whom the literary work is primarily destined" but expands on this conception of an audience by including all people who approach the work—critics, the writer, literary historians, and readers—as a part of the addressee (19). He seems to be eliding the distinction between projected audience (public) and achieved audience. As Middleton shows above, this distinction is important, for it allows modern readers to see what authors might have intended their medieval public to see as opposed to what their audience found. Jauss further notes that "In the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history" (19). The public is the reason a work is written, but without the audience, a work has no readership, no place in a culture, so ultimately no history.

¹⁶Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, *Theory of History and Literature 2* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982). All citations will be documented parenthetically.

The 1381 Rebellion shows that the audience does form the history of the work. The audience of *Piers Plowman* used phrases and ideas from the poem as inspirational exhortations, evident in the six letters taken from leaders of the rebellion. Justice indicates that although one leader, John Ball, may have authored all of the letters as is commonly believed, different hands wrote them (13-22). These letters allude to lines from *Piers Plowman* urging people to “dop wele and ay bettur and bettur” and invoke Piers himself as their hero by calling him brother or by calling him to work (Justice 13-15).¹⁷ Because the letters mention Piers the Plowman, the writers and authors of them are using *Piers Plowman* to help form history; the history of *Piers Plowman* thus includes the rebellion as well, something it never could have had it been written in Latin rather than the vernacular. As Jauss notes: “The historicity of literature as well as its communicative character presupposes a dialogical and at once processlike relationship between work, audience, and new work that can be conceived in the relations between message and receiver as well as between question and answer, problem and solution” (19). The work

¹⁷This line “dop wele and ay bettur and bettur” corresponds clearly to characters from Passus VII and VIII of *Piers Plowman*, Dowel, Dobet, and Dobest who represent the way people should behave—trying to do well, do better, and do best. Will, Langland’s narrator, is searching for these three as he searches for Truth. Langland, through Will, shows his public how to live a spiritual life through the characters. But part of his audience, the rebels of 1381, appropriated the lines differently and used them to exhort other rural people to attack the perceived unjust actions of the clergy and nobility.

and audience create a new work much in the way that a work means something different to each person who reads it, based on that person's experience. The rebels created a new *Piers Plowman* based on their reaction. The audience of *Piers Plowman* found the exhortations and call to arms in the poem, and whether or not Langland meant for his public to find them there is of lesser importance. However, it is entirely possible that Langland did at first intend readers to find exhortations for living a proper life in his poem, but his later revisions suggest that either the messages readers found were not those he intended or that possible actions from those in power forced him to revise.

Jauss further explains the necessity of looking at a work of literature through its audience's responses when he writes

The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees. For it is only through the process of its mediation that the work enters into the changing horizon-of-experiences of a continuity in which the perpetual inversion occurs from simple reception to critical understanding, from passive to active reception, from recognized aesthetic norms to a new production that surpasses them. (19)¹⁸

¹⁸Jauss's use of addressees can have two different meanings. If the addressees are the actual public, then the work achieves the readership its author predicted. If the addressees are the audience, then the work perhaps achieves a different readership. In both cases, but especially in the later, the readership can react differently than the author intended because they, not only the writer, create the text's meaning.

The “horizon of experiences” relates to Jauss’s “horizon of expectations,” for the experiences people have lead to their expectations during an event (44). The horizon of expectations is an important idea, for discovering it allows modern critics to determine what readers might have expected from a medieval author’s work. By reconstructing the medieval mindset, taking into account other literary works available to the medievals, and considering historical events surrounding the literary production, modern critics can create a potential medieval reader, thus predicting the author’s public while knowing the author’s audience. Jauss writes “The coherence of literature as an event is primarily mediated in the horizon of expectations of the literary experience of contemporary and later readers, critics, and authors” (22). All participants in a literary event construct the work’s meaning, and modern readers, while constructing an event of their own, must reconstruct medieval culture to fully understand the literary work in context as well as fully appreciate their own literary event.

A literary work evokes readers’ horizons of expectations in at least three ways: through form, genre, and subject. Because readers expect a work to do something based on its form—whether use a certain theme, rhyme scheme, pattern, or order—they read in anticipation of what should happen. Medieval writers, however, were not overly concerned with form; they appreciated genre and subject (theme) and worked with form, but did not use form to evoke readers’ expectations, nor to alter or surprise them. During the Renaissance, especially with Shakespeare, writers began to use form to evoke and alter horizons. For example, when reading a Shakespearean sonnet, readers expect iambic

pentameter, so when Shakespeare changes scansion, they notice the change. Shakespeare uses the shift in scansion to evoke an altered horizon of expectation, to emphasize an important idea that readers should notice. One part of the horizon of expectation leads readers to expect a typical sonnet form, but another part—their experience with poetry—allows them to notice the deviation from the standard form and see what the writer is emphasizing.

Like form, genre elicits the audience's horizon of expectation. When an audience reads a work in the genre of a traditional medieval romance, for example, they know they will be reading about Charlemagne, Alexander, or Arthur. And those familiar with the genre and the relevant romance cycle will know what should happen. Their horizon of expectation allows them to know the general story and the elements of the romance, so they anticipate those. Writers can then make their audience notice elements that change, as when Gawain participates in a non-chivalrous challenge during the third fitt of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In many Arthurian romances, Gawain is the pinnacle of knighthood, as he is at the beginning of *Gawain*; his failures with Bercilak, the Lady, and the Green Knight all lie outside the horizon of expectations medieval readers—and of modern readers who have not read the poem before. Gawain's failures emphasize the differences between the audience's expectations and the actual scenes in the poem. The failures become focal points,¹⁹ and only when the *Gawain*-poet shows Morgan Le Fey to

¹⁹The specific passages concerning Gawain's failure with Bercilak and the Lady occur in Fitt Three. His ultimate failure with the Green Knight is the subject of Fitt Four.

be responsible can the audience rediscover their expectations of Gawain, King Arthur, and the genre of Camelot as an ideal.²⁰

Subject can also be a part of the horizon of expectations, and in this area, like others, readers' experience with the subject forms their horizon. For example, in Passus Two and Three of *Piers Plowman*, when Lady Mede goes to trial, readers with a legal

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordan, 2nd ed. Edited by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967).

²⁰Another example occurs in the "General Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer evokes the readers' horizon of expectations by initially describing Spring and the events traditionally associated with it (ll 1-11). Readers expect the rest of the poem to follow from this opening like Chaucer's other poems and to be about love, rebirth, procreation, sex, etc. Instead, Chaucer quickly changes direction, writing "thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages" (12) and the horizon of expectations changes. No longer is the genre that of love poetry; instead, it is of religious pilgrimages. And Chaucer changes the horizon once again when the pilgrims decide to tell stories, for readers are now placed in a pilgrim frame with stories from various genres on various subjects inserted. Chaucer is playing with his public's horizon of expectations to show them that any subject or person is a potential target, but also to make the tales entertaining, thus helping to negate any negative reactions. Geoffrey Chaucer, "The General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*," *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3d ed. (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

background would know all of the steps required by all participants and would watch to see if those steps were present or how they were different. Others would base the trial scenes on their own experiences from other media, but those readers would not expect as much from the scenes as a trial lawyer would. Form, genre, and subject work together for “. . . the reader of a new work can perceive it within the narrower horizon of literary expectations, as well as within the wider horizon of experience of life” (Jauss 24). As readers read, they alter their perception as they become aware of what the author is doing (Jauss 19-44, 88). The horizons of expectations are different, for as Jauss says “The social function of literature manifests itself in its genuine possibility only where the literary experience of the reader enters into the horizon of expectations of his lived praxis, preforms his understanding of the world, and thereby also has an effect on his social behavior” (39). Each reader will bring his or her own experiences to the work to create the horizon.

Although the horizons of expectations will be different for all audiences, those from similar time periods will have similar expectations, and by determining their expectations, modern readers can learn more about the audience, the public, the time, and the work itself, because “the reconstruction of the horizon of expectation, in the face of which a work was created and received in the past, enables one on the other hand to pose questions that the text gave an answer to, and thereby to discover how the contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work” (Jauss 28). In order to reconstruct the contemporary horizon of expectations, especially from a time 600 years in the past,

modern readers must try to determine what historical, cultural, and sociological events were taking place, try to determine how many people knew about these events, and try to discover how many of those people had access to the literary work.

One way to look at the events that shaped the horizon of expectations for medievals is to look at ideas from Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Pavel N. Medvedev.²¹ These two authors also write about horizons, but ideological horizons:

Within the ideological horizon of every epoch, there is a value center toward which all the paths and aspirations of ideological activity lead. This value center becomes the basic theme or, more precisely, the complex of themes of the literature of a given epoch. The thematic dominants are also connected, as we know, with the specific repertoire of genres.²²

²¹ The idea to use Bakhtin and Medvedev came from Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: the Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992). This book is a series of essays by Strohm written about fourteenth-century England and how certain texts reflect the cultural ideologies of the time. While the book itself does not cover any of the texts I discuss, it was an invaluable source as it placed Bakhtin and Medvedev in a medieval context.

²² Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Pavel N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. White (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 157. All other citations will be documented parenthetically.

The ideological horizon helps define the horizon of expectation: expectations in literature arise from what readers think will happen based on their knowledge of genre and societal events, while the ideological horizon reflects the culture as defined by ideological phenomena which are aspects of a culture, like art, science, language, etc., that show through study the values and ethics of that culture.

Combining Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Jauss's ideas into "the ideological horizon of expectation" shows that an audience receiving a literary text unites not only their knowledge of genre, subject, and form, but also all aspects of their culture. The ideological horizon of expectations is what readers expect from a literary work based on their complete cultural, literary, and environmental history. It is also a phenomenon author's can use to try to direct their publics' reaction to the text.

By studying the ideological phenomena of another era, like the medieval period, modern readers can reconstruct the ideological phenomena, thus the ideological horizon of expectations for that period. By applying these reconstructions to literature, modern readers can begin to determine how the work was received and to what public the author wrote. This approach provides a more complete understanding of the work when modern readers apply their new interpretations to a new reading of the work with modern ideological horizons.

Bakhtin and Medvedev, writing specifically about literature, state:

The literary structure, like every ideological structure, refracts the generating socioeconomic reality, and does so in its own way. But, at the

same time, in its 'content,' literature reflects and refracts the reflections and refractions of other ideological spheres (ethics, epistemology, political doctrines, religion, etc.). That is, in its 'content' literature reflects the whole of the ideological horizon of which it is itself a part (16-17).

If literature is unlike other ideological phenomena because it both reflects and refracts culture, then all of the other phenomena can be seen through the lens of literature, partly because of the horizon of expectations. For example, in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, readers can see all classes of society, reflected by the literary event. Those classes are not, however, represented as they existed, but refracted by the court poet's view of them. Additionally, that view is refracted by the literature itself, removing readers even further from reality. But Chaucer, writing for the court and for nobility, plays on his readers' ideological horizon of expectations by creating characters who depict what his readers expect. Chaucer's use of his readers' expectations is seen especially in the descriptions of rural characters from the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, the Miller and the Reeve. The descriptions of these characters are not flattering, and their tales are fabliaux, reflecting the types of dirty, comic stories a noble public would expect rural people to tell rather than ones that represent them. Chaucer gives the Knight a tale about chivalry, nobility, and war; he gives the Parson a sermon to help instruct readers, both of which represent them and their classes. But he gives the rural people fabliaux, playing on an educated and elite ideological horizon of expectations rather one representative of the characters.

Piers Plowman also evokes readers' ideological horizon of expectations through reflecting ideological phenomena. Throughout the poem, Langland has his dreamer, Will, participate both actively and inactively in multiple ideological events. For each, a different horizon of expectations is invoked. For example, Will first watches the marriage and trial of Lady Mede (Passus II-IV). While Langland uses language and legal actions that were known to his entire public, those with intimate knowledge of the law would have altered horizons. In Passus V-VI, Langland again has Will witness a changing horizon of expectations. In these Passus, Langland introduces Piers, a plowman, and readers with a rural background would have different expectations than those from the city. In both of these examples, Langland writes about common ideological events, but ones that different readers would view differently. In doing so, he invokes multiple ideological horizons of expectations, the most important one being for the part of his public with intimate knowledge of the scene. Those people will find a more specific version of Langland's message about living right than other readers will.

Ideological phenomena define a culture and can reconstruct for present readers a picture of a past culture. As Bakhtin and Medvedev explain:

All the products of ideological creation—works of art, scientific works, religious symbols and rites, etc.—are material things, part of the practical reality that surrounds man. It is true that these are things of a special nature, having significance, meaning, inner value. But these meanings and values are embodied in material things and actions. They cannot be

realized outside of some developed material. (7)

This idea, that meanings and values can only be present in material things, is important to modern reception of medieval culture, for it allows modern readers to see from items of the past what that culture was like. *Piers Plowman*, for example, shows that some people were concerned with the way the government was run, as seen in the trial of Mede where readers discover that almost the entirety of the nobility had at some time been influenced by Mede's undeserved rewards. Langland may have written this scene for his noble public to help them realize the error of their actions and the need to change their ways. That he envisioned the scene shows more. Corruption among the nobility was part of the culture, part of his entire public's ideological horizon of expectations, showing that it was occurring in fourteenth-century England. Because the work is written in the vernacular, more people had access to Langland's ideas in both written and oral form. Because of the broad public, the idea of a corrupt nobility is emphasized, and Langland tacitly shows his noble public that his entire public is witness to their flaws. Langland warns the public, but he could not know whether or not the noble audience would react. The rural audience did react, in 1381, though evidently not in the way Langland predicted. He failed to judge their reaction to the ideological horizon of expectations that his poetry raised, forcing him to later revise. The same Passus also shows that Langland's ideological horizon of expectations included that his public believed or should believe in the law, in Truth (later to be phrased as Christ), and in the ultimate goodness of the king. Whether or not his audience did is the subject of later discussion.

Conclusion

Through codicological research, modern readers can determine who eventually owned texts, what other texts they owned, and sometimes through annotations how they interpreted them. Such research does not, however, show the entire audience. Even references to a work or references to a situation do not provide adequate information for predicting the entire audience. Looking at these combined, for example, letters carried by rebel leaders that contain references to *Piers Plowman*, and Gower's and Chaucer's references to the 1381 Rebellion provide a better picture of the audience of *Piers Plowman*. However, they still do not, and cannot, show the audience who might have heard the poem read. Yet, as discussed above, the poem probably was heard by an expanded audience of the orally literate.

A way to more completely predict the audience is to first predict the public, although that too is impossible to know. By looking at authorial techniques, however, modern readers can approach the public of a medieval work. Because literature reflects and refracts other ideological phenomena, when ideological signs appear in a literary work, modern readers, though removed from the culture, can glimpse how and for whom the work was intended and how, in actuality, the work was received.

John Gower, for example, wrote the *Vox Clanantis* in reflection of the problems he saw in society. In the text, he refracts those problems, showing his public how they can change their behavior. After the 1381 Rebellion, he reacts to that new and very present

phenomenon by adding a first book in which he depicts the rebels as animals who cannot be understood. Although Gower exhorts all classes to change, his language, his style, and his depiction of the rebellion all indicate a specific public: the victims of the rebellion, the nobility and the clergy.

Although Langland does not respond to Gower's allusions, Chaucer alludes to *Vox Clamantis* in "The Nun's Priest Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*.²³ This tale shows Chaucer's amused reaction to both the rebellion and to Gower's text. While he does playfully depict the rebels as animal-like hordes, Chaucer is still showing them from the perspective of his public. And by parodying Gower's work, Chaucer shows his public even more. His public is the same as Gower's, the nobility and clergy who would have little sympathy with the rebels but who also knew and would be amused by a parody of the *Vox Clamantis*.

Piers Plowman provides a different perspective on both the rebellion and the idea of public. Like Gower, Langland comments on the social ills of the time, showing the nobility, the clergy, and the legal community as corrupt. He also shows part of the rural community as corrupt, with the one good member out of all parts of society being Piers the Plowman. As their letters indicate, members of the rebellion appropriated Langland's text, but they rejected his message of living right. Langland probably intended *Piers Plowman* to be a didactic poem, writing it in such a way that his message of scriptural

²³Justice, pages 207 ff., remarks on Chaucer's parody of Gower's work and the probable reaction to it.

living could be understood by a universal public. His message of reform was to all people, but as individuals—each member of his public is to reform and live right; they were not to rebel against authority. The rebel audience, however, found messages of reformation and revolution. Langland, in probable objection to their reaction, revised his text to alter reception. He did not like the events that resulted from the misappropriation of his poem, so he revised it to alter his public's ideological horizons of expectations. In essence, he tried to remove the message of revolution.

But *Piers Plowman* is about reformation *and* revolution, even if Langland didn't mean it to be, because so many people found reformation and revolution in *Piers Plowman* when they read it. Proof of this idea is in Langland's revisions, which suggest readers found ideas he did not want them to. The readers were able to construct these meanings because the text was written in the vernacular and used the technical vocabulary representative of the audience's professions.

CHAPTER 3

WRITING IN THE VERNACULAR

The audience of a work, the readership it actually achieved, can be partially identified by references made to it or by works it is bound with, but the public, the readership attempted by the author, is more difficult to determine. Yet if modern readers can identify a potential public, they can more fully understand the ideological phenomena of the time.¹ Two ways modern readers can begin to determine an author's potential public are by reading any dedication included in the text and by determining through authorial comments, usually stated in prologues, to whom the author was writing. When authors dedicate a work to a person, however, they might either be dedicating it to a

¹*The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520* explains why modern readers need to determine the audience: "The attempt to recover medieval audiences and to consider what roles they played in producing, responding to, and using texts, and through what modes of textual address these processes occurred, is crucial for an understanding of the language politics of the period." *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999) 110. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

person they want as a patron, or who was their patron, but intend others to read it as well. In such cases, the dedication tells readers one member of the public, and modern scholars must use internal clues to identify others. When authors indicate in their prologues who their readers are, they might be trying to justify their text or trying to establish a certain political position. However, if modern readers can take the authors at their word, these indications (whether addresses, invocations, or specific definitions of readership) can help determine who the medieval author perceived as a public.²

Another way to determine public is to look at the language an author uses. By this I mean looking at the language itself, for example, Latin, French, or English, and looking at individual words.³ During the early Middle Ages, an author's primary written language was Latin, a language that relatively few could read and understand. Modern writers might assume that writing in one's native tongue would broaden a readership. For medieval authors, writing in their native tongue did not seem obvious because the

²I am indebted to the editors of *The Idea of the Vernacular* for identifying many of the passages I discuss below in "Early English Vernacular Writing." While the editions I use are from other sources, their anthology helped me identify some of the sources and provided valuable insight to the debate over vernacular and Latin in these prologues.

³As Jauss implies, discussed in Chapter One, we can also consider form and genre as ways language can indicate an author's audience. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, *Theory of History and Literature*, vol 2 (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982).

Church, the nobility and their administrators, and the courts of law controlled what language most writers used. As the editors of *The Idea of the Vernacular* explain, “At the time [fourteenth century], however, writing in English was not an inevitable choice. The languages of cultural prestige were Latin and, for much of the later Middle Ages, French . . . and the role of the English writer had to be justified and defined”(3). As the Middle Ages progressed, authors began to experiment with works written in their vernacular, their native language, which opened works to a larger audience and thus implies a larger public.

Standardized Languages and Vernaculars

Latin was the dominant language of the Middle Ages. It was standardized, and fully supported by the Church and different governments, so writers were able to use it in many different situations. Gian Carlo Alessio explains some reasons that Latin was supreme, especially during the second half of the thirteenth century. It was considered a holy language (most religious documents were written in Latin and of course the Church controlled education and wrote in and taught Latin), “and, primarily, on the thesis that only Latin could express, in a complete and exact way, scientific concepts (that are related to the liberal arts, philosophy, and theology) and that Latin was created for that precise function.”⁴ While Alessio writes about medieval Italian and the preconceived

⁴Gian Carlo Alessio, “A Few Remarks on the *Vulgare Illustre*,” *Dante Studies* 113 (1995) 59. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

ideas Dante had to overcome to write in the vernacular, the same theory holds true for medieval England. Latin was the dominant language for writing, and authors needed to justify using the vernacular before their works would be considered worthwhile. As a standardized language, Latin was acceptable for literature; as non-standardized languages, vernaculars were considered crude and the language of the unlearned. They were not socially acceptable for writing literature. As Dick Leith explains, the social functions of a language include not only communication between people, but also usage within institutions—administrative, legal, religious, educational, and technological.⁵ Once a language achieves these usages, Leith considers it standardized, having “maximal variation in function, and minimal variation in form” (32). Latin could be used in all situations requiring writing and did not change. In contrast, English (and in Dante’s case Italian) was not so versatile, primarily for political reasons—because people from other countries could not speak or read it. And English was constantly changing to fit functions rather than having a minimal variation in form. Because of these characteristics, English fits Leith’s definition of a vernacular, a society’s language that has not become standardized, is normally not written, and is continually changing (9).

Vernaculars are primarily oral and either do not have a written form or are not considered adequate for writing important public documents. While they are as important as their written counterparts, vernaculars lack prestige because “the demands of speakers

⁵Dick Leith, *A Social History of English* (London: Routledge, 1983) 9. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

on their language are no more than those associated with the customary, local needs of small, technologically simple societies” and the society has advanced technologically faster than the language (9). Early medieval England was in this situation; for while the society was developing a written language, the technology of writing was fully realized through the Church, and the Church wrote in Latin. Latin was standardized, the language of the Roman empire, and its prestige probably rose from people believing it was the only fit language for writing because the Roman empire had been so strong militarily and culturally. Leith suggests “this is most likely to happen where a *classical* variety, enshrining a literature either sacred or secular [in the case of Latin, both], develops over a very wide area, and where literacy is the preserve of the elite” (11). Latin was the chosen language of the Church, so all of the Christianized world used it, first for religious purposes and later for other written purposes so their writings would be prestigious and could cross the linguistic boundaries of Europe. The Church educated people, and when they taught their students to write, they chose Latin. English, for many years, was a secondary language, rarely used, and it developed slowly as a standardized language.

The Norman invasion brought a second standardized language to England: Norman-French. The Norman conquerors became the ruling class of England, the elite class for whom education, thus writing outside of the Church, was reserved. The Normans kept their language, Norman-French, rather than changing to the English of the conquered people. Norman-French remained the first language of English rulers until the end of the fourteenth century and probably was used by upper nobility for long after the

conquest (Leith 27). Furthermore, as Nicholas Watson writes, “Anglo-Norman was widely used in aristocratic writing and conversation, as well as in official business in the lawcourts, the guilds, and both royal and municipal administration.”⁶ French thus became the language of law (along with Latin). Because French was “less strongly institutionalised in the domain of religion,” Latin dominated most other areas (Leith 28). English survived in rural communities and among the English nobility who retained their titles and lands after the conquest. As Norman and English political alliances deteriorated, more members of the ruling classes began to speak English, though Latin and French were still written. Eventually, English writers began to experiment with their vernacular (English) in creative works and, as will be seen in Chapter Four, in legal areas as well.

A vernacular, then, is a non-standardized language that lacks the prestige and usage of its standardized counterparts. For Middle English, the standardized counterparts were Norman-French and especially Latin, which was used across Europe by both the Church and by scholars. During the fourteenth century, prominent English writers began to experiment with English as a valid language for creative writing; when they chose to write in English, they also chose a different public. Latin could only be read by the elite if

⁶Nicholas Watson, “The Politics of Middle English Writing,” *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999) 332. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

they had been trained to read it, but writing in English could achieve a much wider readership who could later transmit the text orally to even more of the population. Because of the potentially larger English audience, one implication of choosing the vernacular is an author making social and political commentary for all members of society to act upon, for example criticizing upper classes in a way that lower classes could understand, and teaching lower classes by exhorting them to behave in certain ways.

Writers might also have turned to the vernacular because their native language better reflected their culture. Bakhtin and Medvedev explain: “Whatever a word might mean, it is first of all materially present, as a thing uttered, written, printed, whispered, or thought. That is, it is always an objectively present part of man’s social environment” (8). Vernacular words have a solid foundation in cultural reality. People, both readers and authors alike, have an intimate relationship with objects and ideas that the words represent; whether words reflect an abstract phenomenon like religion, a semi-abstract phenomenon, like law, or a concrete phenomenon like art, money, or tools, they reflect the ideological aspects of a society.⁷ Latin, on the other hand, reflects only those

⁷Bakhtin and Medvedev further explain: “Whatever a word’s meaning, it establishes a relationship between individuals of a more or less wide social environment, a relationship which is objectively expressed in the combined reactions of people: reactions in words, gestures, acts, organizations, and so on.” This relationship is based on shared ideological phenomena; words, though ideological phenomena themselves, force an ideological horizon of expectations in their hearers or readers. Mikhail M. Bakhtin and

ideological events that could be expressed in a foreign language, one that for medieval people was no longer spoken except in church or when reading certain texts aloud. Latin did not reflect the ideologies of those who could not understand it, so it could not represent the cultural phenomena of England; in fact, it was a phenomenon itself, representing few others, and those that it did reflect, like the church, scholars, and the law, it reflected in an incomplete way. Latin was also losing its appropriateness for writers who wanted a national public, for "there is no meaning outside the social communication of understanding, i.e., outside the united and mutually coordinated reactions of people to a given sign" (Bakhtin and Medvedev 8). Too few people understood Latin completely, even those well versed in it, for it produced a refracted image of the present, but could not reflect society in general.⁸

As a part of people's society, words carry many meanings: denotations, actually defining the word for people learning the language, and connotations, extra meaning

Pavel N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. White (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 8. All other citations will be documented parenthetically.

⁸Dante makes a similar observation: "Few, however, achieve complete fluency in it, since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study." Dante Alighieri, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill, Cambridge Medieval Classics vol. 5, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 3. All future quotations will be cited parenthetically.

associated with words. Connotations help reflect societal values in a way that denotations cannot, especially in literature. Connotations carry the ideological horizon of expectations of the word with them. Members of a culture are familiar with those connotations and with their own horizon of expectations. Words can convey different connotations for different readers, and the more mainstream the term, the more connotations a reader will know. Thus hearing or reading a word, phrase, or sentence invokes the connotations of the situation and the ideological horizon of expectations. By applying the connotations to the horizon of expectations, a word, thus a literary work, can have deeper meanings than mere denotation brings. Writers can use the connotations to evoke certain responses in their public. The connotations of a word or phrase can also raise expectations that authors do not realize, for their audience may interpret the meaning differently than the authors expected. *Piers Plowman* and the 1381 Rebellion are a perfect example of the different interpretations that result from the readers' expectations rather than the authors'.

While using the vernacular carried a cultural advantage, reception of vernacular literature by those who controlled writing was unenthusiastic if not hostile. Church officials were reluctant to relinquish their venue and were concerned about the effect vernacular references to scripture might have. To write in the vernacular, authors needed to justify doing so. These justifications took various forms, from long works devoted to the subject of the vernacular (Dante) to shorter statements in prologues explaining why an author chose the vernacular (early English writings) to references alluding to writing in the vernacular in imaginative texts (*Piers Plowman*).

Dante: A Medieval Defense of the Vernacular

One of the earliest medieval examples of the desire to write in the vernacular comes from Dante: *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, probably written between 1302 and 1305. In an attempt to convince scholars who used Latin that the vernacular was worthy of literature, Dante writes “Since I find that no one, before myself, has dealt in any way with the theory of eloquence in the vernacular, and since we can plainly see that such eloquence is necessary to everyone . . . I shall try, inspired by the Word that comes from above, to say something useful about the language of the people who speak the vulgar tongue” (3). Clearly, Dante believes he must justify using the vernacular, and since no one has addressed the issue in depth, he announces that he will show that the vernacular can be used for writing literature. In doing so, he also shows that the vernacular can be used for prose, creating a rival for Latin in all situations. Alessio claims “Dante [in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*] wants to grant to vernacular poets what is granted to Latin poets and to legitimize the possibility for poets to introduce, in the basic low style, some stylistic elements which by their very nature belong to higher literary genres and styles, elements that pertained only to Latin” (58). To achieve his aim, Dante bases his work on logical arguments common in Latin, for his contemporaries needed that logic to believe him.

Dante wrote *De Vulgari Eloquentia* as a defense of the vernacular, but he wrote it in Latin. He was writing for an elite public, other writers, members of an elite group of poets, ecclesiastics, scientists, etc.; and they considered Latin the only language fit for

writing high poetry. Before he could write acceptable poetry in Italian, Dante needed to justify it to this group, and he probably knew that he needed to write in Latin for them to accept his defense. Latin was the only acceptable language for any high writing, and as Alessio writes, “Bearing in mind the unity of opinion of medieval theoreticians on this privilege for Latin, we can appreciate exactly how radical his position was” (59). That he chose to write *De Vulgari Eloquentia* in Latin seems ironic, yet it clearly shows the need to choose a specific language based on a public. His public expected Latin, so he wrote to them in Latin. Readers of the vernacular might not understand him, but they were not part of his public and so did not matter to his argument. To further capture his public’s attention, Dante uses a second rhetorical device common to medieval and classical literature. He is “inspired by the Word that comes from above,” implying to his readers that his authority to defend the vernacular, and later write in it, comes from God. Since most of his public were ecclesiastics, the alluded invocation of God adds weight to his argument.

Dante begins his formal defense of the vernacular by defining different types of language. Of the vernacular he writes, “I declare that vernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction” (3).⁹ This definition seems to establish the vernacular negatively, for Dante’s public valued study and learning, and something a person can learn without formal instruction is base, not noble. Dante intensifies the

⁹“vulgarium locutionem asserimus quam sine omni regula nutricem imitates accipimus” (2). All translations of Dante’s Latin are by Steven Botterill.

negative image of the vernacular when he adds the second kind of language, *gramatica*, that some people use. He then states, “Few, however, achieve complete fluency in it [*gramatica*], since knowledge of its rules and theory can only be developed through dedication to a lengthy course of study” (3).¹⁰ Learning Latin over a long time might seem positive for Dante’s public, and this is reinforced by showing that few can master it. Latin was complex, the language of an elite few, reinforcing the idea that Latin is the better of the two languages because it requires study and because so few understand it completely. Dante, however, intends to prove that the vernacular is worthy of literature because more people can understand it. He opens the next section of his argument by boldly writing, “Of these two kinds of language, the more noble is the vernacular”(3).¹¹ This statement seems designed to shock his public, for while Dante initially seemed to portray the vernacular as an unworthy language, he now raises it above Latin.

Because the logical argument he is creating demands proof, Dante provides reasons the vernacular is better: “first, because it was the language originally used by the human race; second, because the whole world employs it, though with different pronunciations and using different words; and third, because it is natural to us, while the other, in contrast, is artificial” (3).¹² In his “Introduction” to *De Vulgari Eloquentia*,

¹⁰“Ad habitum vero huius pauci perveniunt, quia non nisi per spatium temporis et studii assiduitatum regulamur et doctrinamur in illa” (2).

¹¹“Harum quoque duarum nobilior est vulgaris” (2).

¹²“Tum quia prima fuit humano generi usitata; tum quia totus orbis ipsa perfruitur,

Steven Botterill shows Dante's distinction between the artificial 'grammar' (Latin) and the natural vernacular and states, "The vernacular, then, is natural, universal and learned almost by instinct; its counterpart is none of these things."¹³ By establishing the vernacular as the first language, and a national language, Dante raises the vernacular further above Latin. As the original language, the vernacular is closer to God—whom Dante invoked in the first line—and to God's intended language for humans. Because of the invocation, this re-connection to God implies again that Dante is transmitting some divine truth and that the use of the vernacular is God's will. Additionally, the connotations associated with "natural" and "artificial" evoke Biblical references, further enhancing the idea of divine intent and adding to the value of the vernacular.¹⁴ Latin, on the other hand, was once a vernacular itself, but grammarians adapted it and made it immutable to overcome the changing nature of language that Dante praises (23). It is artificial, and so cannot be as "holy" as the vernacular.

licet in diversas prolationes et vocabula sit divisa; tum quia naturalis est nobis, cum illa potius artificialis existat" (2).

¹³Steven Botterill, introduction, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, by Dante Alighieri, ed. and trans. Steven Botterill, Cambridge Medieval Classics vol. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) xviii. All future citations will be cited parenthetically.

¹⁴It is important to remember that Dante's audience were ecclesiastics, so while Dante's argument could help sway them—to do God's will—it could also be considered heretical or blasphemous.

After he has shown and explained the reasons he thinks the vernacular is noble, Dante traces the different types of communication and provides details about each. Angels and animals, he claims, do not need a language. Angels do not need language because they are beyond the need for it having been created with such great intelligence that they communicate without words. Animals do not need language either because they react to nature and are a part of nature; and they do not have communities that include other species. They have no need for language, and furthermore, Dante writes, “it [having speech] would have been injurious, since there could have been no friendly exchange between them” (5).¹⁵ People, however, are a combination of nature and reason rather than completely one or the other like animals and angels (Dante 7). Because they possess both qualities, they need to communicate but do not have the complete facilities to do so without language. Their thoughts needed a medium for transmission, and that medium needed to allow people to perceive the ideas of the message sent to them and to create their own message in return. To Dante, language is both rational and perceptual: “For, if it were purely rational, it could not make its journey [carrying ideas between two people]; if purely perceptible, it could neither derive anything from reason nor deliver anything to it” (7).¹⁶ People hear or read words, use perception to determine their meaning based on

¹⁵“sed prorsus dampnosa fuisset, cum nullum amicabile commercium fuisset in illis” (4).

¹⁶“Quare, si tantum rationale esset, pertransire non posset; si tantum sensuale, nec a ratione accipere nec in ratione potuisset” (6).

past experiences, then use reason to determine how to apply the words to the current situation. In other words, language creates in its users an ideological horizon of expectations that allows them to interpret other ideological phenomena around them.

Dante believes that as humans “our language can neither be durable nor consistent with itself; but, like everything else that belongs to us (such as manners and customs) it must vary accordingly to distances of space and time” (21).¹⁷ He then shows that part of the problem with Latin is that it doesn’t change. Change in language is necessary, however, for people and cultures encounter new phenomena and events as they move. The further apart people are from their original culture, the more different their lives become. And language reflects this change through new words and altered meanings.

The changing nature of language was one reason Latin became so prominent:

This [language always changing because people live apart through time and space] was the point from which the inventors of the art of grammar began; for their *gramatica* is nothing less than a certain immutable identity of language in different times and places. Its rules having been formulated with the common consent of many peoples, it can be subject to no individual will; and, as a result, it cannot change. So those who devised this language did so lest, through changes in language dependent on the arbitrary judgement of individuals, we should become either unable, or, at

¹⁷“nec durabilis nec continua esse potest, sed sicut alia que nostra sunt, puta mores et habitas, per locorum temporumque distantias variari oportet” (20).

best, only partially able, to enter into contact with the deeds and authoritative writings of the ancients, or those whose difference of location makes them different from us. (23)¹⁸

As Dante suggests, the immutability of Latin (*gramatica*) is part of its problem. Because it doesn't change, people could not fully understand it; Latin does not reflect the ideological phenomena of the culture.¹⁹ Latin is a phenomenon itself, so part of the culture, but unlike a vernacular, it could not be used to help define and explain other ideological phenomena. Furthermore, for most people of Dante's culture, Latin was not a

¹⁸“Hinc moti sunt inventores gramatice facultatis: que quidem gramatica nichil aliud est quam quedam inalterabilis locutionis ydemptitas diversibus temposibus atque locis. Hec cum de comuni consensu multarum gentium fuerit regulata, nulli singularium arbitrio videtur obnoxia, et per consequens nec variabilis esse potest. Adinvenerunt ergo illam ne, propter variationem sermonis arbitrio singularium fluitantis, vel nullo modo vel saltem imperfecte antiquorum attingeremus auctoritates et gesta, sive illorum quous a nobis locorum diversitas facit esse diversos” (20).

¹⁹Bakhtin and Medvedev show that language, as a ideological phenomenon, establishes a relationship between people, helping them express other ideological phenomena (8). They also explain that literature both reflects and refracts other ideological phenomena (16-17). Language, to some extent, also reflects and refracts other ideological phenomena because it is the medium, whether oral or written, people most often use to communicate or explain other phenomena.

part of their ideological horizon of expectations, except in church. People could recognize Latin and knew from experience what certain phrases meant when it was used in church, but outside of that arena, they could not understand it.²⁰

Dante wants to write in the vernacular so that more readers can understand his poems, but he needs to find the specific vernacular worthy of his poetry. He also, Alessio writes:

states in the *Convivio* (I.v.8-14), on the one hand, that the variable character of the vernacular—which is due to the lack of art—represents the main reason for its inferiority to Latin . . . Consequently, Dante is forced to dedicate most of the first book [of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*] to justifying his choice [that the vernacular was appropriate for poetry], since he was aware that he had introduced the vernacular in an area where only Latin belonged. (59)

Dante believes that some dialect of Italian is the best vernacular because Italian has had great poets and it is closest to Latin (Dante 23). Still, he argues that he must find the correct, noblest dialect to use. Dante searches through all of the Italian dialects he knows, showing how most are ineffectual, base, ugly, and unworthy. He finishes his search by writing:

So we have found what we were seeking: we can define the illustrious,

²⁰For further explanation of lay understanding of Latin in church, see Clanchy, 110.

cardinal, aulic, and curial vernacular in Italy as that which belongs to every Italian city yet seems to belong to none, and against which the vernaculars of all the cities of the Italians can be measured, weighed, and compared. (41)²¹

The vernacular Dante finds appropriate for literature is of every place and no place. It, like the Latin he tries to replace, is artificial.

The vernacular Dante *creates* is based on his dialect, but it is the language of poets, not the spoken vernacular common people used. Poets, Dante warns, must be careful as they write and must obey all rules and only use the highest standards (45). In essence, he creates a standard written Italian, comparable to standard written English today. Alessio shows that Dante sees Latin as a linguistic model and he uses the rules and grammar of the ‘constructed’ (for literary purposes of the time) Latin as his model for its reverse, the illustrious vernacular (60). Poets will use this standard, but Dante also “declare[s] that the illustrious Italian vernacular may as fittingly be used for writing prose as for writing poetry” (47).²² This idea is important, for “even though it is said to exist only in the poetry of Dante and other recent writers, this literary language . . . at a stroke

²¹“Itaque, adepti quod querebamus, dicimus illustre, cardinale, aulicum et curiale vulgare in Latio, quod omnis latie civitatis est et nullius esse videtur, et quo municipalia vulgaria omnia Latinorum mensurantur et ponderantur et comparantur” (38).

²²“confitemur latium vulgare illustre tam prosayce quam metrica decere proferri” (46).

replaces but also parallels Latin as a measure of the linguistic ideal.” (*Idea of the Vernacular* 319). When Dante logically shows that the vernacular is fitting for both poetry and prose, he is intruding on the prerogative of the Church, for the Church controlled writing, using Latin. While creative poetry might exist outside the Church’s realm of influence, prose did not. Dante, however, changed this.

As *De Vulgari Eloquentia* continues, Dante claims that only certain poets should be allowed to write in the vernacular. If, as Dante writes, “The best language is suited to the best thinking,”²³ and if, as he has already shown, the vernacular—certain forms of it—is the best language, then only the best minds—the greatest poets—should be able to use it for the best thinking, i.e., writing poetry (49). Dante, Botterill explains, believed “some kinds—of poem, line, style, construction, word,—are, axiomatically and inappellably, *better* than others; and, by extension, it becomes clear that a significant part of the poet’s duty is to know how to make such distinctions” and that poets should also use ‘appropriateness’ when writing—using the right word in the right place (xxv), which at times must be the vernacular over Latin. Furthermore, Dante writes, “so since the vernacular I call illustrious is the best of all vernaculars, it follows that only the best subjects are worthy to be discussed in it” (51).²⁴ Dante’s “best subjects” are tragic poems, not sonnets, not

²³“ergo optima loquela non convenit nisi illis in quibus ingenium et scientia est” (48).

²⁴“Unde cum hoc quod dicimus illustre sit optimum aliorum vulgarium, consequens est ut sola optima digna sint ipso tractari, que quidem tractandorum

illegitimate or irregular forms of poetry, but serious *canzone* (55). Other subjects should continue to be written in Latin, allowing the Church and scholars–Dante’s public–to keep much of their province.

Throughout *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante has logically developed the idea that the vernacular can and should be acceptable for writing poetry and even prose. Though he shows the problems with vernaculars, “from this apparently negative picture of the vernacular grows a treatise that elevates Dante’s chosen vernacular to the status of Latin and his chosen genre–the humble *canzone*–to that of the noblest poetry.”²⁵ Because Dante has made the vernacular universal, coming from all parts of Italy yet belonging to none, he “has not questioned the system of assumptions that values universality; he has simply changed the definition of universality itself, so as to insert the vernacular into the position that Latin traditionally occupies.”²⁶ Dante’s public cannot question the vernacular on

dignissima nuncupamus” (50).

²⁵Ruth Evans, Andrew Taylor, Nicholas Watson, and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, “The Notion of Vernacular Theory,” *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999) 318. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

²⁶Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 181. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

claims that it cannot be used universally, for he has avoided that argument through his definition of the vernacular. Although Dante never finished *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, his argument was effective (at least to himself), and it allowed him to justify writing poetry in the vernacular. Sometime before he could finish, he started his greatest work, *The Divine Comedy*, written in the vernacular. Partly because of this work, which was well known to Chaucer, Gower, Lydgate, and other writers, English poets were able to experiment with their own vernacular. However, they still used textual commentary to justify their vernacular writings to their publics.

Early English Vernacular Writing

While writing in the vernacular was not uncommon during the early English Middle Ages, Anglo-Saxon vernacular writers did not use the vernacular for the same reasons as Dante or as later English writers. Anglo-Saxon writers usually wrote to pass on history or to establish rulers, dynasties, and nations. They often chose imaginative literature to achieve their aims, but they rarely named themselves or showed a desire to establish the vernacular as an acceptable literary form.²⁷ Latin was the only true literary language, and while Anglo-Saxon vernacular poets wrote great poetry, they were not consciously trying to supplant Latin. Middle English writers, in contrast, often wrote to

²⁷Research into the extent of Anglo-Saxon writers naming themselves or showing consciousness of writing in similar ways to the Middle English authors will be the subject of another paper.

establish a name for themselves, to create themselves as *auctores*, and in doing so, they addressed a public and showed an awareness that they wanted to make the vernacular acceptable to those people who were trained in Latin. Furthermore, they were writing for the future, to be considered authorities by writers they could not predict, and they wanted to establish themselves and their language as appropriate for great writing. Middle English authors established themselves in the context of other writers, usually from classical sources, to give themselves more credibility. Doing so also established the vernacular in the context of both Latin and other vernacular writers, making it more appropriate.

While Dante was one of the earliest writers to defend the vernacular, English writers also were conscious of the need to use their own language, and to do so, they had to justify using the vernacular. The examples below show writers using either a prologue or an envoi to discuss their texts with the public and to explain why they used the vernacular. In most cases, the writers compare English directly to both Latin and French, and they express the desire to replace both with English. In doing so, they claim they are writing an English text for England. When they write for England, they imply a patriotism, whether existent or to be established, that they believe all English people should have. Given the politics of the time and the on-going Hundred Years War with France, the writers' mention of English for England invokes the ideological horizon of expectations for their publics. Because the defense of the vernacular in prologues and envois occurred so often and because the war was ever present in their lives and minds,

audiences expected certain ideas to appear; the authors knew their audiences would expect the ideas, so they could include them when envisioning their public and shape their publics' ideological horizons of expectations with the other themes they included.

Both prologues and envois allow the writers to justify their work, either before or after the fact. Often writers will include a dedication (indicating public), use a modesty trope (stating their unworthiness), or declare their intent. When medieval writers declare their intent, modern readers can glimpse their public, for they often state who they expect to read their work.

The *Northern Homily Cycle*, circa 1315, is a near contemporary of *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. Its Prologue, though not ascribed to any known writer, uses many of the same techniques Dante used in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* when the poet of the cycle attempts to justify writing in the vernacular. The Prologue opens by invoking the Holy Trinity “Fader and Sun and Haligast.”²⁸ This invocation recalls classical authors who invoked muses, but it also clearly places the text in the realm of Christianity and, more importantly, implies, as does *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, that God is inspiring and approving the work. Invoking the Holy Trinity helps justify the use of the vernacular, for the spiritual reference implies that God deems the vernacular appropriate, at least for this text.

²⁸“Northern Homily Cycle: Prologue,” *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999) ll 1. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

The prologue later explains the poet's choice more fully when it explains that it expresses the author's heart, and "On Ingelis tong that alle may / Understand quat I wil say"(63-64). The author clearly desires everyone to understand the text, which implies a broad public. Because the public is so broad, the author must explain why the poem is written in the vernacular:

For laued men havis mar mister,
Godes word for to her,
Than klerkes that thair mirour lokes,
And sees hou thai sal lif on bokes. (65-68)

The vernacular allows the author to create a spiritual text for the lay public. The poet is concerned with their spiritual well being and wants them to benefit from the book; the only way they will be able to is if it is written in English. The book is for the lay public, for ecclesiastics have other books and other instruction showing them how to live correctly, but the laity do not. The author is trying to rectify this,

To wirke sum god thing on Inglisse,
That mai ken lered and laued bathe,
Hou thai mai yem thaim fra schathe,
And stithe stand igain the fend,
And til the blis of heven wend. (75-80)

The work will teach all people how to live rightly, and it can not do so in Latin. The author must use the vernacular: English.

The prologue also serves to unite members of the possible public, showing that both ecclesiastics and laity can understand English, for anyone born in England or who has lived there a long time can understand English (69-72). The poet continues, however, “Bot al men can noht, i-wis, / Understand Latin and Frankis”(73-74). These lines serve two functions: they justify the author’s desire to write in the vernacular, and they invoke the public’s ideological horizon of expectations. As English, the public would know that part of their culture was French, and that both French and Latin dominated writing. All three languages are part of the ideological phenomena that comprised medieval England, and by stressing English, the author addresses another phenomenon, nationality. The prologue, then is refracting the ideological phenomena of the culture, using them to invoke the expectations of the public, and by doing so, reflecting common political opinions about the French, the Church, and language.

Another example of an author’s stated defense of the vernacular occurs in the *Chronicle*, written by Robert Mannyng in 1338. The Prologue of this text serves to identify a primary public, ask for patronage, and defend writing in the vernacular. In the prologue, Mannyng addresses his work to “Lordynges” who are present, and asks them to listen and learn.²⁹ While he addresses lords who are present, they comprise his primary

²⁹Robert Mannyng, “Chronicle: Prologue,” *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520*, ed. Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Nicholas Watson, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State UP, 1999) ll 3-4. Future citations will be documented parenthetically.

public only. As seen below, he also has a secondary public in mind which will broaden the work's entire public. His address uses an interesting phrase to the lords: "listene and lere" (4), which indicates that he is aware his "readers" might also be listeners. This observation of oral literacy is a cultural awareness on his part, for he knows that not all of the vernacular public can read but that many of them will hear his work read. The same might be true if he wrote in Latin, but his secondary public would not understand Latin, and probably would not even hear it because those readers they knew could only read English.

Mannyng continues to explain his reasons for using the vernacular, saying that he will write the story of England, in English, "Not for the lerid bot for the lewed"(5-8). In these lines, Mannyng echoes the author of the *Northern Homily Cycle*, for both want to write in English, for England, and primarily for the uneducated (lewed) rather than the learned (lerid). Mannyng is establishing the cultural identity of his public. In doing so, he uses the ideological horizon of expectations, for stating that he will write in English, for England, leads to the expectation that he will address Latin and French, along with causing people to react to their feelings of nationalism.

Another reason medieval authors wrote in English is clarity. Readers can understand their vernacular better than they can understand a foreign language, especially if the language they learn is only through reading, like Latin. For the English people, English is

the 'mother' or 'kynde (natural) tongue', a language with immediate

access to people's feelings and easily comprehensible—as Latin is not, even to those who can understand it. Writing in English can thus do rather more than provide a practical vernacular means of access to knowledge; it can *signify* clarity and open access and do so even in texts whose projected audience is relatively narrow. (Evans et. al. 325)

The vernacular, then, carries connotations of clarity along with those of nationality. By stating that he will write in English for England, Mannyng is implying that his text is forthright, clear, and relevant to all of the English people.

As expected, Mannyng shows his readers that Latin and French are inappropriate for people from England,

For tho that in this land won
That the Latyn no Frankys con,
For to haf solace and gamen
In felawship when thai sitt samen. (9-12)

Few of his readers will read or understand Latin or French, and Mannyng, like the poet of the *Northern Homily Cycle*, acknowledges that they must have their own language. He wants to create fellowship, through language, and plays off his public's ideas of nationality. In doing so, he reflects the ideological phenomena of the time—concerns about language and nationality.³⁰

³⁰Watson shows that ecclesiastical writers did sometime use the vernacular and perceive it as a valuable tool in reaching all people. He further notes that by the time

Mannyng shows his understanding of the cultural issues of the time when he continues his defense of the vernacular. He believes all people (his primary and secondary publics combined) will be wiser if they know and can read for themselves the history of their country (13-16). To ensure that his public can understand, Mannyng reiterates that he will write his work in English, and “In symple speche as I couth / That is lightest in mannes mouth” (35-36). He is not writing for minstrels (disours), for professional speakers (seggers), or for harpers (harpours) as others have done in the past (37-38). Instead, he writes “Bot for the luf of symple men / That strange Inglis can not ken” (39-40). Mannyng, unlike other poets, plans to use an easily understood version of the vernacular. Poets both before and after him often use inflated language when writing in the vernacular to make their words seem more fitting for performance or for their public. Mannyng’s secondary public does not understand this language, so he will write as simply as possible to help them understand his work.

From this passage, modern readers can understand some of the readers’ expectations from Mannyng’s time. Readers expected poets to use an elevated style and expected poems written in this style to hide some truths that only those able to decipher

Mannyng was writing, use of a language did not indicate class (335-7). What we also should remember, however, is that while language did not indicate class, the uneducated laity did not know French and could not read Latin. Even though some members of the clergy approved of writing in English, others did not and their Latin—and the French of the law courts—limited the understanding and size of an audience.

the elevated style could learn. But Mannyng focuses on vernacular clarity, thus, he is stating that he will reveal truths.

Readers and writers were both concerned with truth and with accuracy. In fact, “So persistent is this concern with truth that vernacular writers routinely submit their works to their readers for improvement (or at least make this rhetorical gesture), envisaging the search for truth as a collaborative project that does not end with the completion of the text but simply moves into a new phase” (*Idea of the Vernacular* 13). Mannyng recognizes the need for this interaction and perceives his public’s desire for truth; he thus writes in plain English so his public can participate.

When Mannyng addresses his primary public again, he indicates both that they should participate and that he wants them as patrons:

Therefore, ye lordes lewed,
For wham I haf this Inglis shewed:
Prayes to God he gyf me grace,
I travayled for your solace. (69-72)

He has written in English and worked to create a text for the lords’ pleasure. In return, he wants them to ask God to look kindly on him, a veiled request for patronage. Patronage was important to Mannyng, and he wanted it to come from his primary public.

Furthermore, “given the volatile status of the vernacular throughout the period, the importance of patronage, and the often highly specific social matrices in and for which texts were composed . . . readers and audiences were in practice as important as authors in

the production of English texts and translations” (*Idea of the Vernacular* 109-110).

Mannyng acknowledges that his readers are important by writing directly to them and by telling them he worked for their pleasure. Without them, he has no reason to write and thus no patron.

The most famous English writers during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries also wrote poetry in the vernacular. John Gower, Geoffrey Chaucer, and John Lydgate all realized the need to use the vernacular to broaden their public. Like the authors I discuss above, they used both prologues and envois to address the issue of the vernacular, and as Rita Copeland notes, they did so like Dante (184). They also often followed Dante’s lead in creating a version of English that functions like the illustrious vernacular established in *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. It is not truly a spoken dialect, but one artificially inflated with borrowed words for use only in writing (Evans et. al. 320). The following passages, however, avoid the inflated style and are written in clear English, designed to defend writing in the vernacular.

In the Prologue to *Confessio Amantis*, written in 1390 and revised in 1393, John Gower speaks to both educated people who can read Latin and uneducated people who can only read English. Unlike many poets, however, he writes to his publics in both languages.³¹ Gower opens *Confessio Amantis* with a statement in Latin that states his

³¹In the *Confessio Amantis*, Gower includes Latin verse before each new book, prohibiting some readers from accessing that part of the text. In the *Vox Clamantis*, he writes only in Latin, establishing a different audience than the one for *Confessio Amantis*.

intent to write in English:

Torpor, ebes sensus, scola parva labor minimusque
Causant quo minimus ipse minora canam:
Qua tamen Engisti lingua canit Insula Bruti
Anglica Carmente metra iuvante loquar.³²
[Dull wit, slight schooling, labor less,
Make slight the themes I, least of poets, sing.
Let me, in Hengist's tongue, in Brut's isle sung,
With Carmen's help, tell forth my English verse.³³

The initial Latin is reminiscent of Dante; Gower, like Dante, creates a very specific audience for his work because these lines are in Latin. Gower differs from Dante, however, by broadening his public to include all vernacular readers: he announces that he will be writing the main text in English. In doing so, he creates an immediate comparison between English and Latin, causing readers to realize that he has broken traditional boundaries in poetry. Their ideological horizons of expectation were not met—writers do

³²John Gower, "Confessio Amantis," *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 2 vols, EETS e.s. 81-2 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trüber, 1900-1) Latin inscription opening *Confessio Amantis*. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

³³The translation is by Echard and Fanger 1991 and used in *Idea of the Vernacular*.

not announce in Latin that the work will be in English—and “at the very outset the force of the vernacular is registered through its non-identity with Latin” (Copeland 217).

Mentioning English in Latin also shows the conflict between the two languages and between proponents of both. Gower, who wrote in both Latin and English throughout his life, seems to be advocating both languages, suggesting writers should use the language best suited to their public.

After Gower explains in Latin that he will write in English, he begins, in English, to explain the purpose of his work. He tells his public, now expanded because of the vernacular, that he is writing in a new way but modeled on classics, and that he hopes his work will survive after he is dead, indicating that he also expects a secondary public of the future, one that will perceive him as *auctore* (1-18). He then explains that some people read for pleasure, some for learning, but that he hopes people will read his work for both. Again, he has broadened his public, for all people, whether those who are educated and know Latin or those who only know English, may read his book, either for pleasure or for learning.

Gower also addresses the vernacular issue in English when he writes “And for that fewe men endite / In oure englissh, I thenke make / A bok for Engelondes sake” (Prologue 22-24). Like Mannyng and the author of the *Northern Homily Cycle*, Gower announces that he will write in English for England’s sake, and he immediately invokes patriotic feelings. Gower is using the public’s horizon of expectations, knowing they will expect a text promoting patriotism from this point on and so will keep reading.

Gower's Envoy to *Confessio Amantis* reiterates his desire to establish English as an appropriate language for creative work. In this final section of the book, he is practicing what Copeland calls auto-exegesis.³⁴ Gower writes that he will finally talk about the work he has just finished, "In englesch forto make a book / Which stant betwene ernest and game," indicating again that people can read it for pleasure or for learning but leaving the audience in doubt as to which way he wrote it (8.3106-10). He then apologizes to "lered men" (8.3113), for he believes when they read it they might be offended. Copeland explains, "Here in the epilogue, the *apologia* for the book before 'lered men' is conventional; but given that the humility *topos* is invoked here in the immediate context of a declaration of the 'Englishness' of the book, this *apologia* also bears the faint traces of earlier medieval protestations of the inadequacy of the vernacular within the domain of learned culture" (Copeland 216). Included in this idea, however, is that Gower's text includes the protest that while an apology is necessary, so is vernacular poetry.

Modern readers must bear in mind also the nature of modesty *topoi*. Modesty *topoi* were common, and authors used them to show that they realized the cultural implications of what they were writing, and "to establish both a poet's own achievement

³⁴Copeland discusses auto-exegesis, the act of commenting on one's own writing, throughout *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*. For details on Gower's auto-exegesis, see Chapter 7, "translation as rhetorical invention," pages 179-220.

and that of the vernacular literary tradition in which the poet is working” (*Idea of the Vernacular* 10). Furthermore, as David Lawton indicates, modesty *topoi* could be used to artificially declaim oneself, in essence using seemingly modest phrase to praise oneself in comparison to others.³⁵ Gower is probably applying this last usage, for as poet laureate, he knew he was a better writer than his words indicate.

Another poet who uses the modesty *topos* is Geoffrey Chaucer. Chaucer, in the Envoi to *Complaint of Venus*, written circa 1390, uses the modesty *topos* to explain any problems readers might have with his translation. He also uses it to apologize for writing in English. In the envoi, Chaucer writes “For elde, that in my spirit dulleth me, / Hath of endyting al the subtilte / Wel nygh bereft out of my remembraunce.”³⁶ By making this apology, Chaucer can justify any deviations from his original text. The statement gives him freedom to interpret and alter the original, for any objections are countered by his modesty.

Chaucer also uses the modesty *topos* to play with his readers. His standard audience, a part of his public, knows his ability to write, to translate, and to create. They also know his tendency to use the modesty *topos* to soften the implication of a text.

³⁵David Lawton, “Dullness and the Fifteenth Century,” *ELH* 54 (1987) 762. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

³⁶Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Complaint of Venus,” *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3d ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) ll. 76-8. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

Chaucer uses the modesty *topos* often, so it has become a part of his audience's horizon of expectations. They expect him to include playful criticism of himself, and if he omitted the modesty *topos* the text's reception would be altered. But Chaucer can also use the modesty *topos* to shape his public's ideological horizon of expectations, for he can add his desire to make English an appropriate standard for writing, thus forcing his readers to acknowledge its use when they read his apology.

Chaucer continues his apology by writing:

And eke to me it ys a gret penaunce,
Syth rym in Englissh hath such skarsete,
To folowe word by word the curiosite
Of Graunson, flour of hem that make in Fraunce. (79-82)

Because he is “elde,” writing in English is a penance, especially since English has a scarcity of rhyme, unlike the French he is translating. These claims are also in jest, for they claim that he will have difficulty finding rhymes, unlike he has done in his other translations. Furthermore, the claims imply that he is not a competent vernacular poet. Chaucer, however, spent his life establishing himself as *auctor*, and based on references to him by Lydgate, Hoccleve, and other later writers, he reached his secondary public and attained his goal. He *is* competent, showing the playful falsehood behind the suggestion that he is not.

When Chaucer mentions the French poet, he, through ideological connotations, alludes to the presence of the French language in England. This allusion invokes the

public's ideological horizon of expectations, for the two countries were often at war, but French was still considered the language of law and sometimes of the elite. He holds the French version apparently in esteem, but because of the play involved in the lines, readers can see that he believes his version is better.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, John Lydgate followed Chaucer and Gower as the next great English poet. In his prologue to the *Troy Book*, he also uses some of the same techniques as those he follows. The *Troy Book*, written from 1412-1420, was commissioned by Prince Henry, later to be Henry V, who wanted English translations of classical works that described war (Lawton 777-778). In the Prologue, Lydgate invokes Mars to help him write the book, even though it is a lowly work.³⁷ Lydgate then praises Henry, his patron, before discussing his why he is writing in English. He writes that Henry “me comaunded the drery pitus fate / Of hem of Troye in englysche to translate” a task that he finds unpleasant because he, unlike Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde*, must write about “The sege also and the destruccioun, / Lyche as the latyn maketh mencion, / For to compyle, and after Guydo make” (105-9). Lydgate would rather follow Chaucer's example and be creative, but his patron—who eventually became his king—wanted a serious work depicting the battles of legend.

While Henry did commission the work, Lydgate also claims that he is writing in English

³⁷Henry Bergen, ed., *Lydgate's Troy Book*, EETS e.s. 97 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trüber, 1906) ll. 1-70. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

By-cause he wolde that to hyze and lowe

The noble story openly wer knowe

In oure tonge, aboute in every age,

And y-written as wel in oure language

As in latyn and in frensche it is; (111-15)

Lydgate, using Henry as a shield, wants to write in English so everyone in England can read and learn the fate of Troy. He also mentions that it needs to be written as well in English as it has been in Latin or in French, which raises the ideological horizon of expectations of his public. Latin was still the primary language of the Church, but also the Romans had created a great empire that Virgil's *Aeneid* documented. It was written in Latin, and the implication is that a translation of a similar story, written in English, would help establish England as a great state for future readers. Additionally, French was the language of the law and England was at war with France. The English needed a great work of poetry to prove themselves as France's equal in all areas.

Lydgate's remarks are similar to Chaucer's and Gower's, and to the other English poets discussed above. All of these poets, like Dante, wanted to write in the vernacular, but they needed to justify doing so. They did not, however, devote entire works to the subject as Dante did. Instead, to avoid intruding on their work, whether original poetry or translations, the authors used devices like prologues and envois to state their intent and justify their use of the vernacular. They were successful, it seems, for people continued to increase the amount of vernacular writing until Latin became scarce, if used at all.

Conclusion

While the English poets above showed their concern with vernacular writing by addressing it directly in their texts, other authors wrote in the vernacular but showed their caution through textual allusions. One such author is William Langland. Langland uses characters in *Piers Plowman* to discuss issues between the vernacular and Latin. In Passus XII, the Dreamer meets Ymaginatif, who chides him for wasting his life. Ymafinatif says to the Dreamer, “And thow medlest with makynge - and myghtest go seye thi Sauter, / And bidde for hem that yyveth thee bread; for ther are bokes ynowe / To telle men what Dowel is, Dobet and Dobest bothe.”³⁸ The Dreamer, who names himself Will and is thought to be Langland’s persona, has been writing poetry rather than living right. The lines invoke the readers’ ideological horizon of expectations because they know Langland is writing in English, and the lines seem to critique him for it. His public also knows that other writers defend both poetry and the vernacular. Based on their knowledge of poetic conventions, the public would expect a defense.

Langland defends his poetry by having the Dreamer say, “‘Caton confortid his sone that, clerk though he were, / To solacen hym som tyme - as I do whan I make; / Interpne tuis interdum gaudia curis” (XII 21-23). If Cato, a cleric, can write poetry, then surely Langland can as well. Furthermore, Langland’s Latin is a quote from Cato which

³⁸William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent, 1987) Passus XII: ll. 16-18. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

says, “Give a place sometimes to pleasures amid your pressing cares” (Editor’s footnote), which shows again that a cleric has given permission. At this point, Langland does not write about the vernacular; instead, the Dreamer continues by first critiquing members of the Church and then says, “Ac if ther were any wight that wolde me telle / What Dowel and Dobet and Dobest at the laste, / Wolde I nevere do werk, but wende to holi chirche” (25-27). These lines indicate that no book exists to show people how to live correctly. Langland’s public, however, has been reading such a book.

Piers Plowman instructs its public throughout, teaching them how to live properly. And for Langland, living properly meant living for God. *Piers Plowman* couldn’t be held up as a standard because its ideas about reform in all professions were too controversial (348). Langland tried, however, to write (and revise) it as a text that could be used to teach all people how to live their lives properly.

Modern critics know that Langland achieved a national audience, for phrases from *Piers Plowman* were used in the 1381 Rebellion. In reading the poem, the national audience found critiques of all professions and classes, and suggestions for all people to change the way they lived. Langland communicates these suggestions to his public through the language of the people, even altering his language in different Passes to indicate a different primary public. Because of the detail he applies to language, I think Langland *intended* a national public, as will be seen from the discussion in Chapters Three and Four.

CHAPTER 4
LEGAL REPRESENTATION AND VOCABULARY
IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

Medieval authors often used prologues, apologies, and envois to indicate their public and to address the problem of writing in the vernacular. They also establish the rhetorical function of their work in these devices. William Langland uses the prologue of *Piers Plowman* in such a way. Langland's Dreamer describes what he sees in his initial vision, including that he sees people from all classes and all professions, some living as they should, others breaking both divine and common law as they try to make their way through the world.¹ Because people from all classes and professions are present, the ideological horizon of expectations is invoked for a public that includes many potential readers. Readers from all classes and all professions have access to Langland's text, and in it he is shaping his public's ideological horizon of expectations by raising public awareness of some problems of the time—lawlessness, corruption, and sin—and allowing medieval readers to predict the message that will follow: they must reform their lives and live justly, through both human and divine law, if they wish to receive salvation.

¹William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent, 1987) Prologue 18 ff. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

While the prologue establishes Langland's message, it also begins to show the different vocabularies Langland will use and the different people he will represent to help transmit his message to his readers. Medieval writers used specific vocabularies or different languages to help establish their subject, and Langland is no different. He uses specific vocabularies from different professions to address his public, not only to help everyone understand the poem but also to indicate which group of readers he is currently targeting.² These vocabularies are the technical jargons of the professions and include terms that members of the profession know intimately. One example of the specialized vocabularies Langland uses is that of the legal profession. This chapter focuses on that vocabulary and on the characters that Langland creates to represent the legal community, indicating that the Passes are written especially for them. Langland's prologue uses legal imagery and terms to emphasize the legal system and legal community by showing the lawlessness of the English people. If the people do not follow the law and no one punishes them, Langland implies, then the fault lies with the law as much as the people.

Langland is not the only author who uses legal vocabulary or discusses and depicts members of the legal community. Gower, Chaucer, and the author of *Mankind*, for example, all comment on the legal system and its practitioners. Because of its common appearance in English literature, modern readers can see the importance the law

²In the term professions, I include the nobility as well as professions associated with a learned trade.

held for the medieval English people.³ It was part of their cultural ideology, and any mention of it would invoke the ideological horizon of expectations of the readers. Clanchy notes that during the second half of the thirteenth century, writs, the most common form of writing associated with the law, were familiar throughout the country, showing that knowledge of the law had penetrated all levels of society.⁴ Most citizens of fourteenth-century England were familiar with the law and with the courts, so they would be able to understand the terms that Langland and other writers used. Members of the

³The English common law was also well known because of its long history. It drew from Roman, Anglo-Saxon, and Norman-French cultures but English rulers adapted these older sources when they saw need. For a history of the early development of English common law, see R. C. van Caenegum, *The Birth of English Common Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973). Van Caenegum provides a brief but detailed history of the early common law, including the prehistory from Anglo-Saxon, Norman French, and Roman sources. He also details the transformation from ordeal, trial by combat, and King's decree to the current jury system. Theodore Plucknett provides a more detailed discussion of the common law, starting his work where van Caenegum ends. Theodore F. T. Plucknett, *A Concise History of the Common Law* (Boston: Little, Brown and company, 1956). All citations will be documented parenthetically.

⁴M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) 272-8. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

legal community—justices, sergeants at law, sheriffs, bailiffs, and clerics, etc.—knew the vocabulary intimately and used it daily; the terms held greater meanings for them, and when writers used the terms or mentioned members of the legal community by title, those members could understand more deeply or respond differently to the message in that part of the text. Most of the texts I discuss focus on the negative nature of legal practitioners, wherein the authors critique the system, either by expressly stating criticisms or by tacitly showing disapproval through mockery. Through this negative commentary, members of the legal profession—and in vernacular works, all potential readers—can find a call for reforming the law.

Gower's *Vox Clamantis*:

The Legal Community in Literature Written in Latin

An example of an author using the language of the legal profession in a text is Gower, who discusses the law in *Vox Clamantis*.⁵ In Book VI, he mentions the courts, justices, sergeants at law, and bailiffs, shows the ways that they are corrupt, and suggests ways that they should change. Gower chose to write *Vox Clamantis* in Latin, so his public

⁵All quotations, unless noted otherwise, come from John Gower, *The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and The Tripartite Chronicle*, trans. Eric Stockton (Seattle, U of Washington P, 1962). Instead of using Stockton's translated title *The Voice of One Crying*, however, I use *Vox Clamantis*. All future citations will be documented parenthetically.

was limited to those who were literate in Latin—the clergy, the nobility, and the legal community. The legal community had ties to the other two classes, for both the church and the nobility had prominent members in the legal community, and many appointments in courts were once made by the king.⁶ Gower writes specifically for these classes, and he is also denying the rural classes, those who could read only the vernacular, access to his work. Because they do not have access to Gower’s ideas, rural readers could not react to the text and Gower’s public would not need to be concerned that the lower classes would be able to acknowledge their faults. Only those intended as his public could understand what Gower wrote, which allowed him to be more forceful and honest in his critiques.

The legal community that Gower focuses on in *Vox Clamantis* was a close knit community, where all members were guild members, and advancement, from apprentice to lawyer to justice, came from within the guild, though the higher offices were often selected by the king. The king also established the courts, and the primary member of the courts of eyre—traveling courts that oversaw the king’s justice throughout the realm—was the justice who sat on the bench and judged people brought before him (Plucknett 167). The itinerant justices helped establish the justice as a part of the legal profession, but, as Plucknett explains, they also made courts more complicated because another person now interpreted the law (167). Plucknett adds that legal specialized languages—Latin and French—forced people to find some means of help when they went to court, which further complicated court proceedings (167). He further shows that the Justices of the Peace were

⁶See Plucknett 27-35; 101-6; 301-7; etc.

originally founded to help sheriffs keep the peace, but during the early fourteenth century, they received the power or responsibility to hold prisoners before they were to be taken to jail, by 1344 to try prisoners, and by 1368 “by themselves, without the association of professional lawyers with them, exercised judicial powers” (168). Their judicial powers elevated the justices to the top of the legal system, and justices became powerful members of the legal profession, thus open to criticism in literature.

By the middle of the fourteenth century, several clear members of the legal profession besides Justices of the Peace can be found; these include judges, clerks, and sergeants of law. Plucknett explains that sergeants are perhaps the most influential and recognized members of the legal profession and traces their profession through the early Middle Ages, possibly first as *advocatus*, one who presents a litigant’s case, then later to *responsalis*, who were concerned with court procedure. He also shows that sergeants might be attorneys who were appointed to a party in court and could commit their master to a plea that was binding, or *narratore* (Fr. *conteur*) who told a person’s story in court to make sure it was accurate and was not mistakenly interpreted through courtroom inexperience (Plucknett 216-8). These types of pleaders, especially the narrators, became the professional lawyers–Sergeants of Law—who were educated at the Inns of Court.⁷

⁷Plucknett notes that The Inns of Court provided training for lawyers, and anyone who showed aptitude could become one—unlike many guilds, legal practice was not limited by class. The junior members learned by watching their masters, and they even had a section reserved for them in court. 220. Van Caenegum makes a similar comment,

Pleaders were needed because the law had become so complex. In fact, the legal profession arose to help common people deal with the intricacies of the law and the language of the law. The field also provided opportunity for educated people from all classes to advance their position. Because of the opportunities and the desire to control membership in the profession, during the fourteenth century sergeants consolidated into “a close guild in complete control of the legal profession” (Plucknett 223). Plucknett explains that no one was allowed to practice the law without being trained or at least watched by them, and the bench and leaders of the bar came from their ranks (223). By the end of the fourteenth century, Plucknett notes, all judges are sergeants, only sergeants can speak in the Court of Common Pleas, and “they ranked as knights and surrounded themselves with elaborate and costly ceremonial” (223).

The prominence of the legal profession and the “elaborate and costly ceremonial” surrounding them led to criticism from authors. Gower, for example, describes the legal community throughout Book VI of *Vox Clamantis* and focuses on their corrupt nature. His object in writing *Vox Clamantis* is to reform the problems he sees in society, and one of those problems is in the perceived behavior of the legal community. By the mid-fourteenth century, the courts, which had originally ruled based on the justices’ interpretation of the law as applied to the specific situations, had lost this discretion and would not act except according to written law (Plucknett 158). This limited action raised

but includes that the Inns of Court were “technical colleges where they [lawyers] learnt their craft like every medieval craftsman, in contact with practising masters” 88-89.

issues of corruption because those who knew the written law could work within it while those who did not have access to writing could not, nor could they know if the law that was read to them was accurate. Plucknett explains that Parliament soon acted and assigned commissioners (non-lawyers) to decide court cases where judges would not (158). This act led many to believe in the corruptness of the courts and that both judges and lawyers would decide a case for money rather than for justice. Gower acknowledges this common belief when he writes: “a struggle for gold so consumes the law [like] a fresh ulcer that stricken justice is no longer safe” (220). He further notes that “under the cloak of law hides cleverness, whereby a law without justice daily devotes itself to carrying out its wishes somehow” (220). Because members of the legal community devote themselves to avarice, they twist the law to help them, showing that lawyers are “always for sale to everyone” (Gower 221). Gower reflects the ideological phenomena of his time, for legal corruption and lawyers who accepted bribes were commonplace. Their corruption was evident in popular literature like *Mankind* and *Piers*, as I discuss below.

Although Gower initially discusses bribery in the legal community through generalities, in later chapters of Book VI, he traces it throughout the legal profession. He writes that a person will be “[first] an apprentice and afterwards a sergeant” before they finally gain “the office of judge” (225). To help emphasize the corruption that existed, Gower shows that when a person progresses through these ranks, “if he is greedy in the first rank, he is more so in the second; and the third rank is the guiltiest of all” (225). Those with more power become more corrupt, and Gower uses this adage to show that

greed infiltrates all levels of the law. Because the law is corrupt and the members of the legal community are greedy, the law, for Gower, no longer served its purpose; instead, it served to make its practitioners rich. Those practitioners could read Gower's work, and because he was a popular court poet, they were probably familiar with his writing. They would understand his message, but they would also realize that it was limited to them and their peers. The criticism was not intended for all classes to find.

Throughout the history of English common Law, judges had great influence, a fact that never changed. Plucknett emphasizes this fact, writing, "With the establishment of the Court of Common Pleas [circa 1244], the decisive step was taken: the future of common law was put into the hands of judges" (234). Judges were taken from the ranks of sergeants, as Gower shows, and had probably achieved renown there before being selected to the bench. Because they were lawyers before becoming judges, there was probably much contact between the bench and the bar, and Plucknett explains that in some cases lawyers actually helped the judges make the final judgment of a case (236-8). But as Gower's writing emphasizes, judges and prominent lawyers would often abuse their power; Gower addresses this cultural norm, hoping to force them to become just. He does so in front of his entire public, the legal community's peers and superiors, but he does not chastize them before the commons. Gower might have chosen to write *Vox Clamantis* in Latin because he wanted to change the behavior of the upper classes but feared political retaliation if he opened the text to vernacular readers. More likely, I believe, is that he wrote in Latin because his public favored Latin over English for serious

writing. He uses Latin both to restrict the transmission of his text and to appease his educated readers.

While Gower criticizes the justices for their abuses of power, he does not neglect other members of the legal profession. He specifically describes sheriffs, bailiffs, and jurors-in-assizes who in “supporting unjust lawsuits because hired by the gold of the rich, they all unjustly slander and oppress the poor” (229). The members of the community are not following the law they practice, and in doing so they hurt the poor and the realm. The king is also affected, for Gower shows that even though the king has not yet reached his majority and should not be held responsible for the current problems, he will be responsible at some point. When he is, he will need to follow Gower’s advice and enforce the laws of the realm (230-33).

Although Gower’s criticism attacks specific members of the legal community and initially seems harsh, modern readers must remember that both Gower’s public and his audience for *Vox Clamantis* were limited by language. The majority of the people of England, those most hurt by the corrupt legal profession, were unable to understand Gower’s critiques. By choosing Latin, Gower privileges those who are educated and restricts the transmission of his text. His words are only for those whom he attacks, including the nobility and the clergy in other books of *Vox Clamantis*. None of Gower’s public receive the brunt of his criticism, for he analyzes all equally. Gower is expressing the faults he finds in the elite and is trying to reform them. Furthermore, he places them above the common people, whom he depicts as inarticulate beasts. The nobility, clergy,

and legal community may have flaws, but the flaws are correctable—the non-human nature of the commons is not. Gower has chosen the rhetorical devices of language and privileged representation to soften his message while criticizing the actions of his public.

The Legal Community in Vernacular Literature

While Gower chose to write to the legal community in one of their languages, Latin, other writers, like Chaucer, the playwright of *Mankind*, and Langland, chose the vernacular to allow a broader public access to messages of corruption in the law. The public for these authors included the rural class, who were able to understand the vernacular. Rural readers could also find messages about legal corruption, part of their ideological phenomena, but they had to find these messages in vernacular literature.

In *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer portrays the legal community through his Man of Law. The Man of Law is a sergeant at law who was trained at the Inns of Court. He is the representative of the legal community, and his presence in the *Canterbury Tales* indicates that Chaucer included lawyers in his public. The legal community's presence also raises the ideological horizon of expectations, for readers would expect Chaucer to comment on the problems of society, especially on the societal role of lawyers and potentially on their perceived corruption.

Unlike Gower, Chaucer neither uses legal vocabulary nor the legal community's language (Latin or French) in "The Man of Law's Tale" to speak to the legal public. However, Chaucer does use language and description to signal the legal public that he is

discussing them; he merely does so in the “General Prologue” rather than the “Man of Law’s Tale.” When introducing the pilgrims, Chaucer describes the Man of Law, first through his actions and learning:

A Sergeant of the Lawe, war and wys,
That often hadde been at the Parvys,
Ther was also, ful riche of excellence.
Discreet he was and of greet reverence—
He semed swich, his wordes weren so wise.
Justice he was ful often in assise,
By patente and by pleyn commissioun. (309-315)

Chaucer’s Man of Law is a sergeant of law, but he has also sat on the bench as a justice. Chaucer describes a man who is wise, well spoken, and important. Yet he counters this praise with the phrase “he semed swich,” and thus signals the readers that the Man of Law is perhaps not as seemly as he appears. When Chaucer indicates that he will counter the first impression of the Man of Law, he is probably teasing his friends, for Chaucer had been in the Inns of Court as a clerk and knew several lawyers from his time there. He is also playing on his readers’ horizon of expectations, for his forthcoming contradictions force readers to read on to see that the Man of Law’s appearance differs from reality.

The ideological horizon of expectations of Chaucer’s public forces readers to predict commentary—while playful—about the corrupt nature of the law, similar but more playful than Gower’s. Instead, Chaucer creates a series of oppositions when describing

the Man of Law's earnings, attire, and possessions, which forces his readers to interpret the descriptive phrases—using their ideological horizons—as a commentary on the law. Chaucer describes the Man of Law's courtly attire, writing “For his science and for his heigh renoun, / Of fees and robes hadde he many oon” to show the common knowledge that members of the legal court required specific robes of office (309-10). “Fees and robes” is also a legal formula that refers to the grant of yearly income lawyers received to buy their robes of office. Chaucer's legal public would recognize this phrase, and any readers with knowledge of legal ceremonial tradition would assume that the Man of Law, like other members of his community, needed an expense account to dress as his status required.

While members of the legal community received a yearly stipend for their robes, Chaucer suggests that not all of the members of the community used the stipend for clothes. The Man of Law “rood but hoonly in a medlee cote, / Girt with a ceint of silk, with barres smale” which suggests simple clothes, the silk belt aside, not the expensive clothes a successful thus rich lawyer would wear (328-9). Readers might wonder at the simple clothes until they realize Chaucer's previous description of the Man of Law, “So greet a purchasour was nowher noon: / Al was fee symple to hym in effect; / Hys purchasyng myghte nat been infect” (311-3). These lines show that the Man of Law purchased great quantities of land, all with unrestricted possession, and that the purchases could not be invalidated. Chaucer, through these lines, establishes the possibility that the Man of Law used both his influence and his stipend to buy land and increase his wealth.

Because the purchasing could not be invalidated, readers might follow their ideological horizons and assume that the law had been violated, or at least had been circumvented to allow the Man of Law his purchasing. Chaucer's allusions to the legal community being above the law signal a commonly perceived fact, a fact that both the legal community and Chaucer's noble and educated readers might recognize.

Chaucer's further descriptions of the Man of Law do not focus on corruption, but rather on his reputation as a knowledgeable lawyer. Chaucer writes, "Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas" and shows the Man of Law's renown"

. . . In termes hadde he caas and doomes alle
That from the tyme of kyng William were falle.
Therto he koude endite and make a thyng,
Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng;
And every statut koude he pleyn by rote. (314-327)

Although this description seems flattering, Chaucer again detracts from it by suggesting "And yet he seemed bisier than he was" (315). The Man of Law is wise, well-learned, and active, but Chaucer tells his readers that much of this is deceptive. The "seeming" indicates that the Man of Law, and through him the community he represents, focuses on appearance rather than action. Chaucer is teasing his friends of the legal community, but he is also writing to his noble and educated public's ideological horizon of expectations. They believed some members of the legal community were corrupt, emphasized by the secrecy of the law, and Chaucer justifies their belief with his descriptions.

Chaucer's initial description of the Man of Law focuses on his behavior, reputation, and attire, but it does not examine his speech. During the Man of Law's prologue, however, Chaucer shows the expectations his readers' held of legal speech. When the Host speaks to the Man of Law. When the Host asks the Man of Law for a tale, he speaks in a very formal tone, suggesting that people expected lawyers to be formal:

“Sire Man of Lawe,” quod he, “so have ye blis,
Telle us a tale anon, as forward is.
Ye been submytted, thurgh youre free assent,
To stonden in this cas at my juggement.
Acquiteth yow now of youre biheeste;
Thanne have ye do youre devoir atte leeste.” (33-38)

The Man of Law replies in this same formal style:

“Hooste,” quod he, “depardieux, ich asente;
To breke forward is nat myn entente.
Biheste is dette, and I wole holde fayn
Al my biheste, I kan no bettre sayn.
For swich lawe as a man yeveth another wight,
He sholde hymselfen usen it, ny right;
Thus woleoure text. (33-45)

The dialogue between the Host and the Man of Law shows the tendency of lawyers to use inflated language even after the need became anachronistic—writing in the vernacular had

become common. This formal style indicates that people expected lawyers to use an overly formal and inflated style when they spoke, and that lawyers spoke as expected.

Sergeants of law fell into the horizons of expectations of rural readers when the law was discussed. And the rural readers knew, as part of their cultural phenomena, that members of the legal profession worked primarily in the courts. So an author, wanting to invoke the ideological horizon of expectations, would discuss the courts and their representatives. Common people knew of the courts primarily through the courts of eyre. These courts came to be known to hold the king's power over people from all classes and soon had jurisdiction over the Court of Common Pleas (Plucknett 102-3). The idea of the eyre, the traveling court, can clearly be seen in the literature of the time.

One example of an "eyre" in medieval literature appears in the play *Mankind*.⁸ In the play, courts and members of the legal community are mocked when Mankind, who

⁸As David Bevington notes, *Mankind*, circa 1470, is a morality play depicting Mankind's turn from Mercy to Mischief, a representative of the devil. While the date given to the play results from codicological evidence of the sole manuscript, the play itself may predate the manuscript. It was performed as a traveling play throughout much of northern and middle England, and our modern vantage cannot determine its actual original date of production. It was, however, one of the first plays to actively seek money from the audience, and records show that it was successful at raising money and was well-known throughout England. David Bevington, introduction to *Mankind*, *Medieval Drama*, ed. David Bevington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) 901-2.

has abandoned his spiritual guide, Mercy, is tried by Mischief for crimes against Nowadays, New Guise and Nought, Mischief's sinful followers. Because Mankind has attacked New Guise, Nowadays, and Nought, Mischief holds a mock court. Mischief says, "I wyll not so; I wyll sett a corte."⁹ Because Mischief controls the court, it immediately becomes comically corrupt; because of Mischief's control, the validity of the proceedings are also in doubt.¹⁰ The mock court is a commentary on the legal system, and the audience would be familiar enough to know how courts functioned.¹¹ Instead of the court being formed along traditional lines by a king or a judge appointed by the king,¹²

⁹"Mankind," *The Macro Plays*, ed. Mark Eccles, EETS 262 (London: Oxford UP, 1969) 664. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

¹⁰ A production of this play by The Duquesne University Medieval and Renaissance Players at the Southeast Medieval Association meeting in 1998 inspired me to use it here. During their production, the players made the mockery of the courts quite clear.

¹¹Michael Kelley suggests that the rural population would not have recognized the legal or Latin terminology. Michael R. Kelley, *Flamboyant Drama: A Study of The Castle of Perseverance, Mankind, and Wisdom* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1979) 82. However, Clanchy shows that by 1307, the law, or at least forms of summons and writs, was fairly well known. By the late fifteenth-century, most people would have recognized the phrases, whether or not they knew the actual meanings.

¹²For information on courts and judges, see Plucknett 20-34; 83-156.

Mischief assumes the role of judge. He has preempted royal prerogative, showing perhaps the power of the courts, or more importantly the power the courts thought they had or convinced commoners that they had.

Mischief further preempts royal power when he assigns Nowadays the role of sheriff and names Nought steward. Mischief commands, “Nowadays, mak proclamacyon, / and do yt *sub forma jurys* [emphasis mine], dasarde” (665-6), and “Nought, cum forth, pou xall be stewerde” (670). As sheriff, a position traditionally appointed by the king, Nowadays is responsible for making the proclamation, reading the writ that brought Mankind to the court, and controlling the prisoner.¹³ Because Mischief assigns the position, he mocks the legal system and usurps the powers of the king. Similarly, the steward or clerk was a powerful member of the legal profession. As a clerk, Nought is responsible for all of the records, and as his name implies, the records mean nothing.¹⁴

¹³Before the founding of the Inns of Court, members of the legal profession included the sheriffs (from shire reeve) who were the Anglo-Saxon kings representation of law in the shire. By the time of the Norman conquest, these sheriffs held great judicial power (Plucknett 101-2). While the power of the sheriff diminished through the creation of judges and sergeants at law, it was still a powerful position, and one assigned by the king.

¹⁴Clerks were not immediately associated with pleading, judgement, or even education at the Inns of Court. Instead, they kept the plea rolls—documents that kept account of the court’s proceedings. The plea rolls summarized the events of the trial, but

The playwright, through the scene, is mocking the intricacies of the legal profession and the record keeping of the court. Mischief has placed his companions in important roles, perhaps referring to the corrupt nepotism in the courts. Furthermore, this court is the devil's court, not the king's, and while connecting the two courts in the audience's minds, the playwright is also emphasizing the common belief that courts were corrupt.

Part of the perceived corruptness of the legal community evolved from language. The author of *Mankind* alludes to the mistrust of the language and of the courts by having the characters use the language of the courts during their mock "eyre." The medieval English courts were announced in Latin and their proceedings were written in either Latin or French. Both languages, by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, were understood only by the educated elite, and their use would cause distrust among the uneducated populace. Language and forms of law were known to all classes, but most people could not benefit from their knowledge of the linguistic forms. They knew some terms and forms, but the intricacies of arguing and the specialized terms in Latin and Norman-French limited their access to the courts. Mischief's phrase "sub forma jurys" (666) is

the clerks often tried to keep them in great detail and included the arguments from both sides and the final judgement. One reason clerks were so powerful was because the lawyers did not know what the plea rolls contained. Plucknett explains, however, that while we don't know the exact relationship between clerks and lawyers, lawyers began to change their technique in court so that what they said appeared a certain way on the plea roll. This indicates some possible connection between the clerks and the lawyers (403-5).

Latin for as “in legal format.” This phrase, while seemingly suitable for the occasion, signals an implied criticism as it connects legalese with Mischief, i.e., the devil, and it tells the lawyers other people know the mischief they cause. Furthermore, when Mischief calls Nowadays “dasarde” or fool,¹⁵ he is referring to a symbolic representative of the legal community. He appropriately uses an obscure word, for he represents the legal community who used an obsolete language. This is a commentary on the legal community, one that most people present would understand.

Mankind further mocks the legal use of specialized language when Nought, the steward, gives Mischief the notes he has been writing. Mischief then reads them aloud in what becomes a mockery of the traditional court opening: “Here ys *blottybus in blottis*, / *Blottorum blottibus istis* [emphasis mine]” (680-681). The Latin here is fake and ludicrous, made up to criticize the intentional obscurity of legal language. The audience would recognize this line as false Latin, and they could find a message: this false court (representative of all courts) mimics reality through its nonsense.

The mockery of the ostentatious language and unnecessary formality in the courts becomes more clear as Mischief continues to read Nought’s writing. Mischief reads, “Carici tenta generalis” (687), meaning “the general court having been held,” which was a traditional heading for manor court records. Nought has followed this traditional opening

¹⁵“dasard, -art,” *Middle English Dictionary*, 1952-99. Meaning a fool or worthless person. The word is rare, appearing twice in Middle English literature, including *Mankind*, line 666.

with “In a place þer goode ale ys” (688), a line that at once maintains the rhyme scheme and criticizes the courts—it has reduced the law to public alehouses. Nought’s record continues by stating the year of the king’s reign “Anno reni regitalis / Edwardi nullateni” (689-690), but the king is “Edward the nothingth,” showing the indeterminacy of the proceedings and again showing the common view that the legal language of the courts was unintelligible and unnecessary. The opening proceedings of Mischief’s court ends with Nought receiving a new title—“owr Tulli” (692), because he has written “Anno regni regis nulli,” meaning “in the regnal year of no king,” satirically raising him to the level of Cicero, the famous Latin rhetorician, writer, and lawyer. Again the mockery is clear: the new great rhetorician and lawyer is Nought, making all others of the profession less than nothing. Furthermore, the Latin contains common words that most people would recognize. By using legal terminology but placing the words incorrectly in formal, scripted phrases and by using false Latin, the playwright is casting doubt on the necessity of specialized language and mocking the legal system.

The Legal Profession in *Piers Plowman*

While Chaucer focuses on descriptions of the legal community to allude to a critique and *Mankind* misuses legal terms and uses comedy to mock the court system, Langland includes representatives from the legal community and their specialized vocabulary to criticize the community and to establish his message to all people—that the need to change the way they live if they wish to receive salvation. *Piers Plowman* has

perhaps the most legal terminology and character representation of any medieval poem.¹⁶

Langland, writing in the vernacular so all English readers could understand his critique, begins by showing lawlessness and corruption among all classes. He then shows the ultimate cause of the corruption through Mede, his representative character for unjust rewards. Passes II and III describe the people most often guilty of receiving unjust rewards—the nobility, the clergy, and the legal community. Langland shows how corrupt the cultural perspective of these groups were through the marriage and trial of Mede.

The courts of eyre were well known to most people, and Langland uses this fact to begin his discussion of the legal community. Before describing the marriage and trial through his Dreamer and Holy Church, Langland provides an example of the traveling eyre that immediately establishes the entire poem's message—that people will be judged by how they live and that to receive a favorable sentence from the divine court they must live according to Truth. This eyre, divine in origin, will judge all people, including the king and the clergy, and only those who follow Truth will be found innocent and receive salvation.

¹⁶John Alford identifies and defines the legal terms and members of the legal community that appear in *Piers Plowman* in his *Glossary of Legal Diction*. John A. Alford, *Piers Plowman, A Glossary of Legal Diction* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1988). He also discusses the use of legal terms in medieval poetry in his excellent article "Literature and Law in Medieval England." John Alford, "Literature and Law in Medieval England," *PMLA* 1997 (92): 941-51.

Langland creates the divine eyre in the Prologue, after the Dreamer sees the King among the lawless sinners. At this point, the vision changes from the Dreamer's perspective and the point of view becomes prophetic. Langland writes:

And sithen in the eyr on heigh an aungel of hevene

Lowed to spekein Latyn—for lewed men ne koude

Jangle ne jugge that justifie hem sholde,

But suffren and serven—forthi seide the aungel: (128-31)

Eyr in this passage can have two meanings: air and eyre.¹⁷ Most scholars translate the line as “thereupon in the *air* on high, an angel of heaven.” This translation seems redundant, for angels are from heaven, which, according to medieval belief, is high in the air. I translate the passage: “thereupon in the *court* on high, an angel of heaven.” My translation allows readers to see that the angel is from heaven's court, where people are judged before entering heaven. According to medieval English convention, courts of eyre were created by the king, who also appointed their judges. Medieval convention also holds that God is the king of heaven, so the “eyr” is the court created by God, and the angel is the justice, appointed by God to judge people. The King will not be exempt, as he often was in his own court, and Langland, through the publics' ideological horizons, raises expectations that more of the poem will compare human law to divine law.

¹⁷The Middle English Dictionary shows that both air and eyre can be spelled multiple ways and appear in literature as eyr, eyre, aire, ayre, and ayr. “eyre,” *Middle English Dictionary*, 1952-99.

The ideological horizon of expectations are met when the angel speaks to the King. The angel discusses the differences between the King ruling on Earth and God ruling in heaven, and between the King's laws and God's laws (131-142). But when he speaks to the King, he does so in Latin. The language represents both the language of educated people and the language of the law. It also shows that the King's business is above the commons and that only those who understand Latin should be privy to the angel's chastisement. The angel's lecture also indicates that the discussion of law will be continued in later Passes.

Because the King was the recipient of the divine eyre's message, Langland indicates that royalty and nobility must follow the law they created. In Passus II, before Mede's trial, Holy Church is showing the narrator a wedding. When he asks who is getting married, she replies: "'That is Mede the mayde,' quod she, 'hath noyed me ful ofte, / And ylakked my lemman that Leautee is hoten, / And bilowen h[ym] to lordes that lawes han to kepe'" (Passus II 20-22). By stating that Mede has betrayed her beloved, Loyal Faithfulness (Leautee), Holy Church is issuing a warning: any who follow Mede rather than the Church and faithfulness will pay at some point. Her warning is more pointed than general, however, for by mentioning "lordes that lawes han to kepe," she specifically identifies members of the nobility, closely related to the legal community, as those who are betraying her.

The nobility are further implicated in the corrupt law through their highest member, the king, and his close relationship to Mede. While petitioners for Mede and

False journey toward the King's court to receive royal judgement, the King awaits their arrival. The King confers with Conscience and professes his intent to be just: "Shal nevere man of this molde meynprise the leeste, / But right as the lawe lok[th], lat falle on hem all!" (II 197-198). He claims that his court will be unbiased, but Langland has already shown his public that kings can be corrupt—through the angel's lecture and through the statement that Mede "myghte kisse the Kyng for cosyn and she wolde" (II 133). By showing this kinship, Langland implies that the King is a patron of Mede's. Langland's tacit chastisement of the King has legal ramifications as well, for it implies that even the highest judge of human courts is corrupt, despite his stated intent.

Initially, the King follows the codes of law. When Mede's party arrives in London, the King issues a writ for their capture. In doing so, he

. . . comaunded a constable that com at the firste,
'Go attachen tho tyraunts, for any [tresor], I hote,
And fettreth [Falsnesse faste], for any kynnes yiftes,
And girdeth of Gyles heed—lat hym go no ferther;
And bringeth Mede to me maugree hem alle!
And if ye lacche Lyere, lat hym noght ascapen

Er he be put on the pillory, for any preyere, I hote.' (Passus II 199-205)

When the King sends the constable, he is following traditional codes of law. People were brought into the courts through a procedure of writ, a document that in a legal sense was a "brief official written document . . . ordering, forbidding, or notifying something" (van

Caenegum 30). During the formation of the common law, many proceedings originated or ended with writs, often sent by the king or in the king's name.¹⁸ However, because Mede represents bribery, Langland is suggesting the corruptness in the law. He shows that the traditional form of the law can be corrupt and that Mede is entering the courts.

¹⁸Plucknett shows the historical development of the writ, tracing it from its earliest use as a writ of right and showing that it was originally “not an assertion of the jurisdiction of the court, but rather a royal commission conferring on the judges the power to try the matters contained in it” (355-6). Van Caenegum explains that by Henry II's reign “people began to obtain writs to be safeguarded against other possibly disadvantageous writs” (37) and that sometime during the 1160s or 1170s “the classic writ of novel disseisin [dispossession of land or serfs] was a pure writ of summons to appear in court, and was entirely judicial, i.e., it belonged to the final stage, when the development from executive to judicial instrument had reached its logical conclusion” (45-6). So the writ, originally an executive that was right handed down from the king or important members of the court, became a primarily legal document and key element in the common law. By Henry II's time, the pattern on the writ *praecipe*—“render the land in N. to A. or else come and plead in my court”—had become an integral part of common law (van Caenegum 50-52; Plucknett 357) and probably between 1160s and 1170s developed the two elements of the current common law writ—summoning of the defendant by the sheriff to whom the writ was addressed and requiring that the sheriff appear in court with the writ (van Caenegum 53).

When bribery figuratively enters the courts, Langland is suggesting that the King will break his vow to be just. The assumed criminals are to be held in jail until the trial, but Mede, who comes from royal blood, will receive personal attention from the King. Langland says that they are related, which literally justifies the King's command but figuratively shows the connection between the King and Mede and suggests that he will accept unjust rewards. The King has already broken his intent to treat all people equally under the law. Readers now know that he, along with the legal community, will have to change to be saved.

The King further acknowledges Mede by saying

'I shal assayen hire myself and soothliche appose

What man of this world that hire were levest.

And if she werche bi my wit and my wil folwe

I wol forgyven hire this[e] giltes, so me God helpe! (III 5-8)

When the King says he will judge her case himself, he is suggesting the possibility of a pardon known as *de gracia*, 'of grace.' According to Thomas Green, these pardons were royal prerogatives, usually granted to people who had killed in the king's service.¹⁹ While Mede has not killed in the King's service, she has acted on his behalf, giving him rewards for following her, thus breaking human laws.

¹⁹Thomas Andrew Green, *Verdict According to Conscience: Perspectives on the English Criminal Trial Jury 1200-1800* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1985) 30. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

While the highest representative of the courts, the King, is potentially corrupt, Langland shows that corruption permeates the entire profession. He shows this complete corruption by using legal vocabulary and representatives of the legal community to signal that he has a message for those who practice law. He begins this message during the marriage and trial of Mede. During the depiction of this trial, Langland uses specific legal terms and images as he shows the events. While the terms he uses were known by most classes, they were used primarily by the legal community—the sheriffs, beadles, constables, lawyers, and judges. And one of the primary judges in cases concerning the nobility was the king. Thus, Langland includes the king in his message. His message for these people is simple—follow Truth, not Mede, to follow the only law that matters: God’s law.

Langland establishes the message to follow divine law through the personification of Holy Church. Holy Church tells the narrator, and through him the legal community since they have been signaled by the use of their language, that he should “Knowe hem there (the people gathered at Mede’s wedding to Fals Fikel-tonge) if thow kanst, and kepe [thee from hem alle], / And lakke hem noght but lat hem worthe, til Leaute be Justice / And have power to punyssh hem—thanne put forth thi reson” (Passus II 47-49). Holy Church’s warning is direct, for the people who witness and celebrate the wedding of Mede become her patrons and will be judged by Leaute (meaning Holy Faithfulness and probably referring to God) when they die. Any readers should beware, but the message here is specifically for the legal community. They should identify the people and

professions who follow Mede and take undeserved rewards; they should avoid those people's actions if they wish to be saved.

As the Dreamer follows Holy Church's advice and identifies the people at the wedding, he notes that the people:

Were boden to the bridale on bothe two sides,

Of alle manere of men, the meene and the riche.

To marien this mayde was many man assembled,

As of knyghtes and of clerkes and oother commune peple,

As sisours and somonours, sherreves and hire clerkes,

Bedelles and ballifs and brocours of chaffre,

Forgoers and vitailleurs and vokettes of the Arches;

I kan noght rekene the route that ran aboute Mede.

Ac Symonie and Cyvyllie and sisours of courtes

Were moost pryvee with Mede of any men, me thoughte. (Passus II 55-64)

While people from all professions appear at the wedding, the legal community should take special note because they have been signaled by Langland earlier when Holy Church said "lordes that lawes han to kepe" (Passus II 22). These people are specifically identified as "sisours," "sherreves," "sherreves clerkes," "bedelles," "ballifs," and "vokettes of the Arches." All of them are members of the legal community; Langland, by mentioning them by the names that are part of their community's vocabulary, indicates the special relevance of the passage to them. The two types who should be especially

cautious, however, are “Cyvyllle and sisours of courtes,” for Langland identifies them as those who follow Mede closest.

In case those representatives of civil law (Cyvyllle) do not recognize his message, Langland emphasizes that they are in danger when he has Cyvyllle and Symonye take money and agree to read a charter that Liere gives them (Passus II 67-70). In Langland’s description:

Thanne Symonye and Cyvyllle stondenforth bothe
And unfoldeth the feffement that Fals hath ymaked,
And thus bigynnen thise gomes to greden ful heighe:
‘Sciانت presentes et futuri, &c.

Witeth and witnesseth, that wonieth upon erthe . . . (Passus II 71-75)

The Latin here (line 74) is a legal formula meaning “be it known to all present and to come . . . (Schmidt note on line 74). This formula, one that probably preceded any formal announcement, once again directs those readers who would commonly use it: the legal community. Langland is signaling those readers to listen and is also connecting them with lies; he makes this connection in the vernacular, so all readers of English will know the warning he has sent to the legal profession. Furthermore, he lists Mede’s lineage and what she represents—a warning for those legal readers who accept undue rewards.

Other members of the legal community also accept false rewards. Langland shows two of these, notaries and false witnesses, as the congregation at Mede’s wedding prepare to go to London. False speaks to the people present, “namely to the notaries, that hem

noon faille; / And feffe Fals-witnesse with floryns ynowe, / For he may Mede amaistre and maken at my wille.’” (Passus II 146-148). This passage indicates that False must have these members of the legal community that False on his side when he goes to court.

Langland cautions them by mentioning them by name and showing that they will swear that False and Mede are innocent and should be married (II 158-61). Because of the legal context of the passage and the nature of courts, Langland sends a message to those frequently involved in trials—the legal community—that he is aware of the bribery that was common. Members of the legal audience should recognize themselves at this point and be alert for the outcome of the trial and the ultimate message Langland sends them.

During their journey to the King’s court, Langland again shows the people, especially members of the legal community, being controlled by Mede and her followers. On their way to court, “sette Mede upon a sherreve shoed al newe, / And Fals sat on a sisour that softeli trotted,” (II 164-5). The representatives of the legal community are so under Mede’s influence that they serve as mounts and go where she directs. The sheriffs are burdened by unjust rewards, showing the common assumption that sheriffs took bribes to overlook the law. Also, a jury member is burdened by falseness, implying that jury members too can be bought and will lie for the defendant if they are rewarded.

By depicting the sheriff and jury members as horses, Langland is playing with convention. Rural or common people were often depicted as beasts in literature, for like beasts they were uneducated, and authors used this fact to demean them further. Two of the most famous examples of this convention are contemporaries of the C-text of *Piers*,

rather than the B-text I use, but they exemplify the convention: Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* and Gower's *Vox Clamantis*. Chaucer uses the convention to mock Gower and at the same time mock the 1381 Rebellion. Gower uses the convention to gain his public's trust, showing first that he empathizes with them and the problems they faced in the 1381 Rebellion before he begins to chastize them. Conversely, Langland alters the convention, bringing the legal community to the level of beasts. In doing so, he shows that betraying the law betrays all of England and dehumanizes those who abuse their power.

While some members of the legal community, like sheriffs and jury members, are represented as Mede's patrons through direct contact, others are associated with her through the King. Because Mede is royalty, "The Kyng called a clerk . . . / To take Mede the maide and maken hire at ese." (III 3-4). By doing so, he acknowledges that he is related to her and that, perhaps, he will pardon her. He also implicates the clerk, another member of the legal community, whose duties should include documenting the case, not tending to a royal criminal's needs. The clerk symbolically accepts undeserved rewards when he escorts Mede at the King's command.

Langland shows the clerks following Mede when they approach her in her cell. After the justices and Mede finish their business, clerks arrive to offer her their services in exchange for rewards. Mede responds by giving them rewards and promises "To loven yow lelly and lordes to make" (III 30). Again, Langland unites the legal community in corruption, expressing the common belief that the law represents only the rich, for only the rich can afford it.

Higher members of the legal community, justices, are guilty of accepting bribes, as Gower has shown. Langland also suggests their guilt by describing their consolation of Mede. When Mede is taken to a private chamber, a priest permits justices to visit her. When they are with her, the justices seek to assure Mede that they are still her followers. They say, “‘Mourne noght, Mede, ne make thow no sorwe, / For we wol wisse the Kyng and thi wey shape / To be wedded at thi wille and wher thee leef liketh / For al Consciences cast and craft, as I trowe’” (III 16-19). Despite the best efforts of Conscience, who represents the morals Langland believes the people should hold, the justices will abandon the law for rewards. By representing them as taking bribes, Langland is joining them with the rest of the legal community. He, like Gower, depicts the higher legal positions as being corrupt, just as the lower ones are.

Once the King is ready to begin the trial, he summons Mede, who is brought before him by sergeants, again connecting the legal community with unjust rewards. When Mede arrives, the trial begins, with Conscience serving as prosecutor. He lists her crimes, and in doing so, he lists those who profit from her rewards, including jury members, sheriffs, clerks, and justices, through whom she evades justice and “‘ledeth the lawe as hire list” (134-58). Langland has shown his readers throughout that Mede leads the law, and now he expresses it explicitly. In doing so, he emphasizes the corrupt nature of the law. He also shows that Conscience, his moral allegorical character, knows that the legal community is corrupt, signaling them to beware: the rest of Langland’s public now has a spokesperson—Langland through Conscience.

Conclusion

While Langland shows the entire legal community as guilty of accepting false rewards, his main purpose in the poem is to exhort his public to follow divine law. His first indication of this message comes during the divine eyre in the Prologue, but he provides other examples later. Before Mede's marriage ceremony, for example, Theology intercedes "And seide to Cyvyll, 'Now sorwe mote thou have— / Swiche weddynges to werche to wrathe with Truthe!'" (Passus II 116-117). "Truthe" is actually Jesus, as readers discover later in the poem, but the legal audience should recognize at this point that their actions—worshiping Mede—go against Truth's teachings and thus are dishonest. After Theology explains how Mede has been turned against God's original intent for her (Passus II 118-125), he says "fy on thi lawe!" again showing the church's anger at those who practice law for their own benefit rather than for the good of all people (Passus II 124).

Theology curses Cyvyll and suggests a course of action for Cyvyll to redeem himself. Theology says:

'Forthi wercheth by wisdom and by wit also,
And ledeth hire [Mede] to Londoun, there lawe is yshewed,
If any lawe wol loke thei ligge togideres.
And though justices juggen hire to be joyned with False,
Yet be war of the weddyng—for witty is Truthe,
And Conscience is of his counseil and knoweth yow echone,

And if he fynde yow in defaute and with the False holde,

It shal bisitte youre soules ful soure at the laste.’ (Passus II 134-141)

Theology’s message here is clear—the law is truer in London (Passus II 135) than outside because the King is the judge. However, the law still might be corrupt and allow Mede to marry Fals Fikel-tonge (Passus II 137). If the King does allow the marriage, meaning if the King accepts undue money, the legal audience is warned to still be careful and not follow their ruler’s actions, for Truth, counseled by Conscience will be the judge in their final court case. If they are found guilty, they will not receive salvation.

As the trials of the early Passes of *Piers Plowman* close, Langland reiterates to the legal community that they must follow divine law as they reform their current practices. Although Mede tries to defend herself, Conscience and Reason finally convince the King that Mede is guilty in Passus IV. The King abandons her and vows that he will obey the laws, with Conscience and Reason at his side, and that he will seek Truth. With this conclusion, Langland shows his public his vision of England—that the King, and through him, the nobility, the clergy, and the legal community, will live morally, following Truth for the salvation of England. Langland has met the ideological horizon of expectations that he raised in the prologue by showing his entire public the faults of the legal community and bringing the poem to a point where he can provide a leader for all people. The King, his followers, and all of the representative people who followed Mede to London for her wedding determine that they must seek Truth. They do not know their way to his castle, so they decide to follow Piers the Plowman.

When Langland provides Piers as a guide for his characters, he is also providing a guide for his public. They too must follow Piers down the figurative and symbolic paths in the poem in the quest for Truth. Piers is a follower of Truth and lives his life accordingly. Langland provides this guide for his public, and the guide unites them at the most common level—through the common people. Piers is a rural worker and so represents the rural community. Through him, Langland signals that the focus of the next Passes will be the rural population, and in doing so, he begins to use their representatives and their vocabulary.

CHAPTER 5
RURAL REPRESENTATION AND VOCABULARY
IN MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

While Langland identifies members of the legal community in Passes II-IV and depicts their patronage of Mede, he uses their specific vocabulary very little. Chaucer and Gower use the vocabulary more, while the author of *Mankind* emphasizes legal vocabulary when he mocks the courts. In addition to legal vocabulary and character representation of the legal community, the author's also use similar techniques to when representing other communities. This chapter focuses on the same texts as Chapter Four, but in it I show how the authors, especially Langland and the author of *Mankind*, begin to use more vocabulary as well as descriptions of the vocational representatives of a community when discussing the rural or common population. By using the vocabulary and representative of rural communities, the authors become a voice for the people and allow their concerns to be heard by other classes. The authors also show educated people, whose concerns and critiques were mostly written in Latin, that through vernacular texts, their actions could be examined by rural readers.

In Passes V-VI, Langland focuses on the search for Truth, and using rural people shows readers his primary message in the work, that the proper way to live is by seeking Truth and following Piers. Langland shows the seven deadly sins, dressed as rural

laborers, before focusing on the title character of Piers, a plowman, who represents ideal behavior. When he describes Piers, Langland uses the vocabulary of the rural people, helping them identify with this character.

Similarly, the author of *Mankind* chooses a common person as his title character, one who uses the tools and language of a rural dweller. Again, rural readers can identify with the character more easily, allowing them to see their faults and find ways to correct them through him. Chaucer and Gower, on the other hand, provide examples of rural people but not of their language, signaling perhaps that they did not identify rural or common readers as part of their public. Chaucer writes in the vernacular, but he uses stereotypes of rural people rather than depicting their language and their labor as Langland and the author of *Mankind* do. Gower writes in Latin, prohibiting most rural people from reading his text and denying the rural audience a voice.

Gower's *Vox Clamantis*:

Rural Representation in Literature Written in Latin

In writing the *Vox Clamantis*, Gower was creating a didactic work wherein he hoped to instruct his readers to reform themselves and create a better, more devout England.¹ He includes books and chapters for most classes—nobility, clerical, rural,

¹All quotations come from John Gower, *The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and The Tripartite Chronicle*, trans. Eric Stockton (Seattle, U of Washington P, 1962). I use the Latin *Vox Clamantis* instead of *The Voice of One Crying*.

merchant, and legal—but he writes in Latin. By choosing Latin, Gower indicates that he is limiting his public, excluding at least the rural population.² They might hear the work read, but Gower’s criticisms of them are meant for his public, those educated in Latin. Gower further alienated the rural class but aligned himself with the learned when he added the first book, a dream vision describing the revolution of 1381.³

Eric Stockton refers to Gower as the poet of the 1381 Revolution and the “near perfect mirror of his times” (Introduction 4). But Gower reflects the voice of the nobility, not the voice of all people in England. If indeed he was a “mirror of his times,” Gower should reflect accurately all classes of medieval England. While he does critique all classes in Books Two through Seven, by adding Book One he creates a biased version of the rural class’s actions during the 1381 Rebellion. He is an accurate mirror of his public—educated readers—for Gower wrote for men like him—wealthy land owners and members of the court. Gower might represent the voice of England, but his text must be *refracted* to determine how he represents all English people, for *Vox Clamantis* does not *reflect* all of them.

²The merchant class might have also had difficulty understanding the *Vox Clamantis*, for any education they received would concern trade terms. While they might know some Latin, they probably did not know enough to understand fully Gower’s work.

³Eric Stockton, introduction, *The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and The Tripartite Chronicle*, ed. and trans. Eric Stockton (Seattle, U of Washington P, 1962). 4. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

Gower's prologue to Book One openly shows that he is not writing for a rural public when he writes, "In the beginning of this work, the author intends to describe how the lowly peasants violently revolted against the freemen and nobles of the realm" (49). By referring to peasants as lowly and by writing in Latin, Gower establishes that he is the voice of the nobility and clergy and the mirror of their attitudes rather than a poet who is trying to critique England from an unbiased perspective. He continues this approach throughout Book One using a variety of techniques like connotative language and examples of divine order. More significant, however, is the version of the rebellion that he chooses to represent. Although he claims that the peasants attacked the nobles and later describes their destruction of London, churches, and nobles (Book I, Chapter 13-18), modern historical studies indicate that the uprising included people from various classes, of various occupations, and that the revolt struck at those they considered oppressive, which in most cases did not include the clergy. Christopher Dyer shows that the rebels attacked royal officers, escheators, justices, lawyers, and tax collectors.⁴ Dyer also shows that they burned documents and took action against landlords, usually in the form of stealing livestock, wood, and hay but that "serious personal violence against lords seems to have been unusual" (12-14). Richard Dobson claims that there are no impartial

⁴Christopher Dyer, "The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381," *The English Rising of 1381*, ed. R.H. Hilton and T.H. Aston (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984) 12. All other quotations will be documented parenthetically.

accounts of the revolt because anyone who could write was an enemy of the rebels.⁵ He further emphasizes that the revolt was not a class struggle and spends much of his introduction explaining why (17).⁶ The rebels did attack many people who were members of the clergy or nobility, but these men were usually in the service of the crown and collecting taxes deemed unfair. Dobson explains that while the rebels killed Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor of England, for example, as chancellor he was a person whom the rebels perceived as a cause of their problems and one they could look to when seeking vengeance (23). Dobson also writes: “But hostility towards the royal officials was combined, as so often in the history of popular disturbances, with an intense and genuine devotion to the person of the king” (23). The rebels wanted justice but did not, it appears, want to kill or subjugate those of the upper classes, especially the king. Gower, however, is writing primarily to those who were

⁵R.B. Dobson, *The Peasant's Revolt of 1381* (London, Macmillan: 1970) 3. Other quotations will be documented parenthetically.

⁶For other detailed accounts of the 1381 revolution, see Rodney Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985). Hilton's work, like Dobson's above, provides historical background on the causes and participants of the revolt and of the actual damage they inflicted. Steven Justice in *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) also describes the revolution, providing historical accounts as well as the way authors described the events in the literature of the time.

threatened by the rebellion. He distorts the facts of the rebellion, denying the rebels a voice, but in doing so he unifies his audience through their fear of the rebels and their assumption that they were divinely superior to common people. Because Gower includes his attack on the rebels, his public can retain their assumption and be more accepting of his critiques.

Derek Pearsall suggests that Gower created the images of monsters and chaotic mobs because he “is not, to be frank, much interested in the actuality of the event, rather in the image of primal chaos and reversion to bestiality which follows on the challenge to the established political order.”⁷ Kurt Olsson offers another interpretation when he claims that Gower was trying to prepare his noble and clerical audience for the critique that follows in later books “By magnifying and qualifying certain facts” and that by doing so, “he prepares a potentially hostile audience for the reproof of later books.”⁸ Both of these critics offer interpretations of the *Vox Clamantis*, and both lead to the same idea: Gower had an agenda when he wrote book one, and it was not to speak on behalf of the rebels but rather to speak against them to unify his audience. Although Justice explains Gower’s

⁷Derek Pearsall, “Interpretive Models for the Peasants’ Revolt,” *Hermeneutics and Medieval Culture*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher and Helen Damico (New York: State U of New York P, 1989) 65.

⁸Kurt Olsson, “John Gower’s *Vox Clamantis* and the Medieval Idea of Place,” *Studies in Philology*, 64:2 (Spring 1987) 138. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

self commission of “public poet, the formal voice of the commons” (209), the voice of the commons is not immediately evident in Book One.

In Book One of the *Vox Clamantis*, Gower attacks the rural or peasant class in three major ways: he changes the entire class from humans to beasts, he condemns the class for seeking to improve their lot in life, and he creates in his audience a hostile response for the class through the use of connotative terms. By making these three attacks, Gower appears to remove any possibility of fair treatment for the rebels, and by writing in Latin, he removes any possibility of uneducated response. Instead of supporting the commons and being their voice, he renders them voiceless, but he does so in accordance with his public’s ideological horizon of expectations. Most descriptions of the rebellion show the unjust actions of the rebels, and Gower’s audience expected and believed they had been harmed. Gower uses their expectations to show that he is a member of their community before he critiques them later.

In the first eight chapters of Book I, Gower dreams that “he saw various bands of rabble” turned into animals (54). Gower represents the groups as various animals, asses (54), oxen (56), swine (57), dogs (58), cats and foxes (60), domestic birds (61) and as flies and frogs respectively (62). In all of these situations, Gower removes the peoples’ human voices, replacing them with animal noises. Once they become animals in Gower’s dream vision, he can replace their complaints with unintelligible noise, reflecting the beliefs of his noble audience. The nobles thought the rebels had injured them through the revolt and also thought the rebels harmed them when workers left their land to demand

higher wages elsewhere. Dyer notes that rural laborers' fortunes were rising and that landlords attitudes about rising pay were negative. Serfs were also emigrating to the cities, and landlords were fighting this movement so someone would work their land (22-24). Gower is voicing the nobles' beliefs in this book and, simultaneously, muting the beliefs of the rural community.

Throughout his description of the rebels turned to beasts, Gower attacks them for seeking to overthrow the "divine order" and create for themselves a more secure place in society. In later sections, Gower claims the people who were turned into asses were "carried away by sudden revolt" and "each which had been useful lost its usefulness" (54-55). Instead of being useful by working in the fields, the rebels wanted to usurp the rightful place of the "horses" (55). The horses here are obviously the nobles, and Gower condemns the asses—the rebels—for seeking to replace the nobles by saying "Great things are fitting for great people, and lowly things for lowly people" (54). And any change in this or desire for great things by lowly people is against nature. The other descriptions of rebels turned into animals are similar, and whether they are seeking better food, wine, or lodging, Gower condemns them for rising above themselves. He concludes his catalogue of "astonishing things," which are actions the rebels took, with "what an astonishing thing, when the fly rose above the lofty eagle and longed to keep up with its pace" (64), clearly another reference to the divine right of the established order and the evil caused by trying to change it. Once more, Gower is the voice of the nobles, not of the commons, because he is playing on the expectations of his public.

Gower implies a third critique of the rural population in the first eight chapters through the words he uses: he focuses on connotations to create a reaction in his public against the “peasantry.” Of those turned into asses in Chapter Two, he writes, “. . . the curse of God suddenly flashed upon them” (54) implying that their movement from the perceived natural order where they were subservient to the clergy and nobility invoked a divine curse and changed them from people to animals. Gower further writes, “They who had been men of reason before had the look of unreasoning brutes” (54), showing the belief of the upper classes that those in revolt lacked rationality, one of the medieval criteria that defined humans and separated them from animals. The wrath of God and “unreasoning” thus connote negative ideas, for the words carry the idea of divine retribution on beings that are monsters and less than human.

Gower continues his linguistic assault on the rebels, referring to them as “terrifying monsters” and “rascally bands” (54), as “lawless” and “ungovernable by reason” (56), as “worthless ones [dogs]” who “persisted in nothing unless it was lowly” (58-59), and as “wild men . . . deserving of eternal fire” who were “unreasoning reprobates” (72). The phrases above evoke an image of evil that readers associate with the members of the revolt. Readers who already agree with Gower can reinforce their opinions of the rebels, while those who might have supported them turn against them.

Gower exacerbates the perceived image of violent, inhuman, and vulgar commoners when he describes the Jackdaw, a pun on Wat Tyler’s name,⁹ who takes

⁹In a note on *Vox Clamantis*, Chapter Nine, Book One, Stockton explains, “the jay

command: “While all were looking on, this bird spread his wings and claimed to have top rank, although he was unworthy. Just as the Devil was placed in command of the army of the lower world, so this scoundrel was in charge of the wicked mob” (65). While Gower’s connection of the Jackdaw with the Devil and his followers with demons from hell should make his readers believe he is firmly on their side, he does not fully silence the rebels until, ironically, he allows the Jackdaw to speak. The first long speech in the poem is by the Jackdaw, and it initially might seem like Gower is finally speaking for the commons by allowing them a voice: “O you low sort of wretches, which the world has subjugated for a long time by its laws, look, now the day has come when the peasantry will triumph and will force the freemen off their lands” (65). This appears to give them a positive voice, for despite his violence, the Jackdaw becomes a spokesperson whose language seems noble and can state their concerns and desires. In Gower’s work, however, he speaks in Latin, so he cannot speak *to* the rural people to express their concerns. His voice is of the commons, but as perceived by the nobility.

The nobility perceived the commons as unreasoning, violent, and unjust. Gower uses this perception as he writes the Jackdaw’s speech. During the speech, the Jackdaw twists the rebelliers’ desires: “Let all honor come to an end, let justice perish, and let no virtue that once existed endure further in the world. Let the law give over which used to

. . . was commonly called ‘Wat,’” suggesting the pun on Wat Tyler’s name (352). He also notes *The Canterbury Tales*, where Chaucer might be making a similar pun in the “General Prologue,” lines 641-3.

hold us in check with its justice, and from here on let our court rule [700]" (65). Instead of giving the commons a positive voice, Gower shows the *nobles* that the rebels were in lawless revolt, seeking to destroy all good and replace it with evil and chaos. He further states, "The stupid portion of the people did not know what its 'court' might be, but he [the Jackdaw] ordered them to adopt the laws of force" (65), echoing the noble belief that the commons were ignorant and violent.

After the dream vision ends, Gower begins his didactic message to his readers, including the rural population. Because he writes in Latin, however, the third estate cannot receive the message. Gower opens book three with a prologue that discusses how members of all estates say they have been injured by the revolution (113). When he mentions the injuries, Gower is at once acknowledging that all feel the injustice and that all three were at fault.

Although Gower has shown that all three traditional classes are guilty of crimes leading to and including the 1381 Rebellion, his decision to write in Latin and spend most of the *Vox Clamantis* critiquing the upper classes indicates that he is defending the lower classes. He has depicted the rebels, thought at the time to be from the lower classes, in the way his educated audience saw them. Gower follows the discussion of those injured by the revolt by saying he will discuss the problems of all three estates in the remaining books and ends the prologue by invoking God (113-115). Because Gower says he will discuss all three estates, readers can assume that their own class will be criticized as much as the rural class. Furthermore, by invoking God, Gower implies that the criticism is

divinely inspired just as he supposes the estates are. In the religious mind set of medieval England, divine inspiration carried great weight in arguments.

After Gower critiques the clergy and nobility, he briefly turns to a critique of the third estate, the commons, saying “For after knighthood there remains only the peasant rank; the rustics in it cultivate the grains and vineyards [560]. They are the men who seek food for us by the sweat of their heavy toil, as God Himself has decreed” (208). These lines describe who the “peasant ranks” are and what work they do, or should do. Gower at times seems sympathetic to the rural class, but key phrases like “seek food for *us*” and “as God Himself has decreed” indicate that he is still writing for his public.

Gower’s representation of the rebellion and his criticisms of the third estate seem like attacks, but through them he is actually invoking the ideological horizon of expectations of his public. And his public does not include the rural population. But he does represent them and their ideas. As their “voice,” he states their complaints against the other classes in his critiques, but he uses the language the nobility and clergy considered their own. The rural population usually did not use or understand Latin, so Gower speaks to the nobility and clergy for them. His critiques of the nobility and clergy are longer and more specific, and only because he attacked the “peasants” first will they accept the rebuffs. Gower uses his rhetoric effectively and does, despite an initial modern reaction to the text, provide a voice for the voiceless.

Rural Representation in Vernacular Literature

The 1381 Rebellion was a significant moment in English history, and late fourteenth-century literature reflects this. The major writers of the time mention the rebellion at some point, showing its place as a cultural phenomenon. Of some interest are the reactions of poets to each other concerning their relation to the 1381 Rebellion. Gower, for example, includes several possible references to *Piers Plowman*, a poem which rebels carried references to in letters they bore. In Chapter Fourteen of Book One, Gower lists names and actions of some of the rebels, then writes “Will swears to join with them for mischief” (67). Will is the name of the dreamer of *Piers Plowman*, as is the poet, William Langland, so this line could refer to the poem and its influence on the rebels. Gower further writes, “One man helping in what another man did, and another agreed that they would be bad, worse, and worst” (74). Stockton notes this line as a possible reference to characters in *Piers Plowman*, Do-Wel, Do-Bet, and Do-Best, who the rebels also mention in their letters.¹⁰ A final possible reference to *Piers Plowman* occurs at the end of the vision in Chapter Twenty-One: “In his subjection the lowly plowman did not love, but rather feared and reviled, the very man who provided for him” (95). *Piers Plowman* influenced the rebels, though perhaps not in the way Langland intended. In the poem, Piers is connected to Love, so Gower’s comment seems to satirize Piers’s love and focus on the rebels’ use of Langland rather than Langland’s intent.

¹⁰Stockton’s note is on page 359, note fourteen. For a complete discussion of the letters carried by the rebels, see Justice.

While Gower clearly satirizes Langland and *Piers Plowman* over the 1381 Rebellion, Chaucer appears to satirize Gower and *Vox Clamantis* in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. Justice makes an interesting case for Chaucer's source for the *Nun's Priest Tale*. He explains that Chaunticleer, the rooster from the tale, is actually Gower, then proceeds to show how, given his interpretation, we can see Chaucer mocking Gower and Gower's fondness for his own poetry (214-215).¹¹ While Justice's interpretation is apt, I think Chaucer may have modeled the Nun's Priest, not Chaunticleer, on Gower, thus making the Nun's Priest's tale become Gower's tale, *Vox Clamantis*. Chaucer names the Nun's Priest John, reminding readers of Gower, and in the final lines of his prologue calls him "This sweete preest, this goodly man sir John."¹² Chaucer's description of the priest is good humored but simultaneously mocking; Chaucer perhaps uses the mocking tone because, as Justice explains, the relationship between Chaucer and Gower was strained when Chaucer was writing the tale (217). Whether the Nun's Priest or Chaunticleer represents Gower is perhaps unimportant, for the tale certainly mocks the *Vox Clamantis*. In doing so, Chaucer recreates Gower's negative description of the rebels, but perhaps also acknowledges that he sees past Gower's statements and understands his rhetorical goals.

¹¹See Justice, pages 207-231 for his complete and worthy argument.

¹²Geoffrey Chaucer, "Nun's Priest's Tale," *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen ed. Larry D. Benson, 3d ed. (Boston, 1987) ll. 4010. All quotations to Chaucer's work are from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

Chaucer's rhetorical goals in *The Canterbury Tales* differ during each tale. Many of the tales seem to respond to another character's tale, and when read as such, provide an entertaining perception of humanity. Chaucer, in order to play with his subjects and amuse his public, does not provide accurate representatives of any class, most notably the rural class. For example, the Miller and the Reeve, are perhaps stock characters—both resemble stereotypes rather than actual people. In the General Prologue, Chaucer describes the Miller as “a stout carl” who was large, strong, and a champion wrestler (545-48). Chaucer also gives him a very coarse physical description, describing his full, red beard and his broad, hairy nose with the wart that grew from it (552-57). This description is unflattering, and while perhaps describing an actual person, Chaucer more likely uses it as a physical representation of the Miller's coarse personality and common behavior. The word “carl” is also significant, for it is the first direct description of the Miller: “The Miller was a stout carl” (545). “Carl” was a term for a common man, but it also derives from the same source as churl, giving it negative connotations. Instead of a good man, the Miller is base, which Chaucer uses to his advantage when later writing “The Miller's Tale.” “The Miller's Tale” is a fabliaux, a short comic tale, usually dirty, depicting the daily life of middle and lower classes.¹³ Fabliaux were popular among the noble class (Chaucer's readers), perhaps because the stories exemplified the beliefs the nobles held about the lower classes.

¹³For a complete definition of the fabliaux, see the introduction to the *Canterbury Tales*, page 7.

The Miller's tale itself does not provide any direct references to the rural population or their vocabulary. Instead, it depicts an old carpenter whose young wife cuckolds him with a young scholar, and the scholar is branded in the rear by a parish clerk in a scene commonly known as the "misplaced kiss." The tale is comic, mocking scholars, old men, and priests alike. None of the characters are rural, so our focus must turn to the teller of the tale—the Miller. The Miller is rural, and by connecting him with the fabliaux, Chaucer perpetuates his noble audience's perception of the rural population. The Miller and his tale are crude and uncouth, and as the first representation of the rural population, these traits transfer to other members in the readers' perceptions.

Like that of the Miller, Chaucer's description of the Reeve is negative and probably used to represent the nature of the Reeve. The Reeve, Chaucer writes, "was a splendre colerick man" (587), showing that physically he is the opposite of the Miller, but still describing him negatively. Like the Miller, who could "stelen corn and tollen tries; / And yet he hadde a thombe of gold" (562-63),¹⁴ the Reeve could keep track of his lord's grain, accounts, and livestock (593-600), but he did so dishonestly as implied by the lines "Ther was noon auditor koude on hym wyne" (594), "Ther koude no moanbrynge hym in arrerage" (602), and "Ther nas baillef, ne hierde, nor oother hype, / That he ne knew his sleughte and his corryne;" (603-04). These lines play on the fears of land owners, for

¹⁴Benson's note on this line shows that it is a possible reference to proverbial wealth "with the implication that there are no honest millers." Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3d ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1987) 32.

they needed to trust their reeves, but this stereotype indicates that their trust in a reeve was often a concern.

The Reeve responds to the Miller because he was a carpenter by trade (and probably because it provided Chaucer with a means of connecting the tales and showing the relationships between the pilgrims) (CT Fragment I 3914). In the Reeve's prologue, the Reeve says, "I shal hym quite anon;/ Right in his cherles termes wol I speke." (3916-17). These lines foreshadow another bawdry tale through the comments of "hym quite" or pay back, and "cherles termes" or crude words. They also comment on rural people in general, for the term churl can refer to a commoner as well as crudeness. Chaucer connects crudeness and commoner in the minds of his educated readers, allowing their stereotypes of the rural community to perpetuate and silencing any voice the rural community might have.

The Reeve's tale is another fabliaux, this time about a miller who looks suspiciously like the company's miller (ll 3925-40). The tale attacks the miller's honesty, perhaps suggesting that all millers are crude and dishonest, before showing two students trick and cuckold him, suggesting that the miller is not as wily as he believes and that educated or higher classes are smarter. Chaucer maintains these stereotypes for the sake of comedy; one of his other pilgrims could tell the same stories, but they would not be as comical to Chaucer's public—the members of the court.

Of the three representatives of the rural population (the Miller, the Reeve, and the Plowman), the Plowman provides Chaucer with the best opportunity to speak to the rural

population. In the General Prologue, Chaucer describes exemplars from the three estates: The Knight, who was “a worthy man” (43); the Parson, who was poor, “but riche he was of hooly thought and werk” (478-479); and the Plowman, who was “his [the Parson’s] brother” (529). When Chaucer describes the Knight (43-78), he depicts a man who lives and loves chivalry, is truthful, and “a very, parfait gentil knight” (72). He embodies stereotypical nobility. The Knight, as a representative of his class, is given a voice through his tale, which is a tale of battle, courtly love, and nobility. Through him and his tale, the nobility can see themselves as good. Conversely, the Plowman is idealized through a minimal description rather than through a tale that could provide readers with a direct reflection of him and the rural population.

Like the Knight, Chaucer describes the Parson (477-528) as a man who is poor in worldly possessions but rich in faith and actions. The Parson is devout, honest, kind, and helpful, and, like the Knight, embodies the stereotypical good ecclesiastical by following Christ’s words before and while teaching them (527-528)¹⁵. The Parson, as a representative of what is good in the church, is given a tale that is religiously didactic, teaching people how to behave in order to reach heaven. These two tales, the Knight’s and the Parson’s, begin and end the *Canterbury Tales* proper, suggesting an additional frame for the narrative. This frame is of the estates, where the two higher estates—the

¹⁵The *Canterbury Tales* include both positive and negative descriptions of the clergy. Most are negative and imply a critique of the current action of the church. The Parson is Chaucer’s lone positive example.

nobility and the clergy—frame the lower classes. In doing this, Chaucer frames the way people should behave around the way they often do. He also creates a hierarchy of the pilgrims, for the Knight, speaking first, becomes a model for readers to follow throughout the tales, and the Parson, speaking last, becomes a model for readers to follow in their lives. Both pilgrims, thus their classes, have voices.

Of the three exemplars, the Plowman is the only one without a voice. Chaucer describes the Plowman as one who works hard, for he “hadde ylad of dong ful many a fother; / A trewe swynkere and a good man was he,” (530-531). The Plowman is also a model for lay members of the church, for he was “lyvyng in pees and parfit charitee” (532) and “God loved he best with al his hoole herte / At alle tymes, thogh him gamed or smerte.” (533-534). He also followed Christ’s laws, loving his neighbor as himself (535) and tithing through both work and property (539-540). Unlike the other two exemplars, however, the Plowman receives only a cursory twelve line description, denying readers a round picture of him and denying him and thus the rural population a voice that represents them in a positive way. Modern manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* do not include the Plowman’s Tale, indicating that perhaps it was lost but more probably that Chaucer never wrote it. Chaucer may have died before the tales were complete and so misses an opportunity to speak to the rural population.

While Gower speaks for the rural population in a way they cannot understand and Chaucer does not provide a tale from a positive rural character, *Mankind* focuses around a generic member of the rural population named Mankind. *Mankind*, whose manuscript

dates circa 1470 but may have been performed earlier, was written and performed for commoners and was one of the more popular plays of the century.¹⁶ Its popularity comes partly from its author's use of the vernacular and especially from the specialized language therein; the main character, Mankind, is a peasant, a farmer, and thus represents the entire rural population. Through Mankind, the author is able to address his subject, which Mark Eccles states is "to warn men against the world and the Devil." This subject invokes the horizon of expectations of the viewers, for they would expect a play with this subject to include a character who shows that he is human by falling from the Church's teachings, following sin, and reforming later.

The play's authorship and audience are subjects of scholarly debate. Anthony Gash writes, *Mankind's* "author's were sophisticated: they were well-versed in theology and law, as well as having a taste for slang and bawdy jokes," suggesting that the authors were Cambridge clerics and that the play was performed by professional actors, primarily for money.¹⁷ Kelley, using evidence from linear signatures and references in manuscripts,

¹⁶Mark Eccles, introduction, *Mankind, The Macro Plays*, ed. Mark Eccles, EETS 262 (London: Oxford UP, 1969) xlv. See also Eccles note about the popularity of the play and his reference to David Bevington, *From Mankind to Marlow*, 48.

¹⁷Anthony Gash, "Carnival Against Lent: The Ambivalence of Medieval Drama," *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*, ed. David Aers (New York: St. Martins, 1986) 82-3.

suggests that a single author, a monk from Bury St. Edmunds, wrote the play.¹⁸ The authors of the play obviously knew the law and Latin, for their use and mockery of both indicates that they was familiar with both. They also use stilted and inflated language during Mankind's formal speeches and during Mercy's speeches, indicating that they were perhaps scholars since they mimic scholarly language.

While authorship can provide some insight to the play, the public can provide more, for it tells modern critics who the author or authors intended as viewers. To determine the potential public of *Mankind*, modern critics must turn to textual evidence and extrapolate the public from the lines of the play. Kelley suggests that the public resembled a Shakespearean public, using Mercy's opening address as support (81). He is probably correct, for the opening address refers to "sourens that sitt" and "brothren that stonde" suggesting different levels of social class in attendance.¹⁹ Like Kelley, Gash suggests a broad public based on the multiple levels of humor—from intellectual parodying of a court to a rural humor of rough slapstick (88). Because the public—and probably audience—of the play was diverse, the playwright often writes in a simple vernacular to allow the entire public access to his message: people should avoid the Devil and temptation and prepare themselves for an afterlife by following Scripture in this one.

¹⁸Michael R. Kelley, *Flamboyant Drama: A Study of The Castle of Perseverance, Mankind, and Wisdom* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1979) 4.

¹⁹*Mankind, The Macro Plays*, ed. Mark Eccles, EETS 262 (London: Oxford UP, 1969) ll. 29. All further citations will be documented parenthetically.

The author of the play opens the message to his public by playing on their horizon of expectations; and he does so through humor to help soften the impact. Eccles comments on the author: “in achieving his purpose he made use of lively humour and of comic action” (xlv). The humor and action make the message easier to hear, for the audience can laugh while learning. The comic scenes allow the audience to relax and participate where drier or intellectually weightier scenes might cause them to lose interest. Because the scenes are comic and keep the audience’s attention, the audience does learn, and the author’s message is specifically to them because it is told in their language and using their vocabulary.

Mankind opens with a sermon from Mercy where he states his function between humans and God. Mischief and his followers, New Guise, Nought, and Nowadays, soon enter to taunt Mercy and tell him that they will thwart his goal of saving Mankind, who represents all humans. Once the four representatives of human frailty leave the stage, Mankind enters and speaks to the audience. In this first speech to the audience, Mankind tells who he is, showing that all people come from the earth:

Mankynde. Of þe erth and of þe cley we haue owr propagacyon.

By þe prouydens of Gode þus be we deryvatt,

To whos mercy I recomende þis holl congrygacyon:

I hope unto hys blysse ye be all predestynatt. (186-9)

This passage shows the Biblical formation of humans from the earth by God. It not only identifies the audience and their creation, but also it defines Mankind as one of them.

Because Mankind is closely related to the audience, they can identify with him and better receive the ultimate message of the play—to avoid vice but to accept both the inevitability of their fall and the promise of mercy through repentance.

While the above version of creation is traditional, it becomes more meaningful for the audience because they see Mankind reiterating that he, like many of his readers (or more precisely, viewers), comes from the earth, showing an intimate relationship between the earth in which they toil and their existence. Mankind also carries a spade as representative of his trade.²⁰ The spade further connects him with the audience, for “brothren who stande” probably represented the rural community who could not afford seats, and they would have been familiar with the tools of agriculture. Mankind’s most significant connection with his common audience is, however, when he addresses them directly (188-189). Unlike characters by Gower or Chaucer, Mankind directly wishes his viewers an afterlife in heaven. Because he addresses them directly, Mankind becomes one of them, a member of their world rather than a character in a play. When Mankind refers to Heaven, he establishes or foreshadows the ultimate message of the play, for through Mankind, the author shows the audience how to behave in their daily lives, by working

²⁰David Bevington includes the stage direction “Enter Mankind with a spade.” “Mankind,” *Medieval Drama*, ed. David Bevington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975) 118. While this direction is not in the original manuscript, Mankind uses a spade before he leaves the stage, both to work his land (328) and to beat New Guise, Nowadays, and Nought (380-391), so the stage direction seems appropriate.

and avoiding vice. He also demonstrates that if they fall into vice, then they will still receive mercy if they repent.

Mankind also shows that he represents a rural audience through his use of specialized language. Instead of acknowledging New Guise, Mankind says “Thys erth wyth my spade I xall assay to delffe” (328). In this line, Mankind speaks to the audience in several ways: he shows his duty, to work the earth; the tools of his trade, the spade; and his plan, to “delffe” or dig. By showing his intent with this speech, Mankind again connects with the audience, for he is using terms from their specialized vocabulary—“erth,” “spade,” and “delffe”—and in doing so, he unites himself with the audience; he becomes their representative as one who shows their language, their lifestyle, and their work. Because he is their representative, Mankind is telling the viewers that their duties are the same as his—to work the earth, to use the spade, and to dig.

Mankind also has a message for the audience, for he claims that he will “To eschew ydullnes, I do yt myn own selffe” (329). Because Mankind represents the peasant class, they see through him that they too should “eschew ydullnes” and do their work themselves rather than waiting on or relying on another to do it for them. Mankind also echoes their probable concern over the result of their work when he says “I prey Gode sende yt hys fusyon!” (330) showing that while they may do the physical and worldly work, only God can actually bring the desired results—a plentiful harvest. Thus the passage becomes a dual message, for the audience sees that they must be both hard workers and devout prayers to succeed in their duty to the land.

Mankind has established an empathetic relationship with the rural audience and shown how his problems and life are similar to their own. Similarly, the vices try to establish an empathetic relationship with the audience (351-63). They echo the fears of both Mankind and the audience when they discuss the crop and what it means to Mankind: that crop failure due to drought will cause starvation throughout the land and will especially hurt the rural population who survive through their crops. Throughout the passage, they try to use terms from rural vocabulary, including “corn”, “pore lyffe”, “labor”, “crop”, and “acres”, but they use these terms without evoking any kind of response, for they are not intimately involved with the ideas behind the words. They fail in their attempt to connect with the audience because they merely echo the fears rather than showing that they have lived them. They show this fully when New Guise speaks to Mankind and comments on his labor: “Ey, how ze turne þe erth wppe and down! / I haue be in my days in many goode town / zet saw I neuer such another tyllynge” (361-363). New Guise is amazed at Mankind’s persistence in working and claims he has never seen anyone till a field as hard in any of the towns where he has been. The audience knows that people in towns don’t till—farmers till—so New Guise’s statement alienates him from the audience because if he doesn’t know the rural lifestyle, he cannot represent rural dwellers. They must see Mankind as their only representative in the play, for he is the only one who works as they do and fully knows their experiences.

New Guise, Nowadays, and Nought continue to voice their concerns about Mankind’s work and the living he makes from it, showing the concern of Mankind and

the rural audience, who both know that if the crop fails, then they will go hungry and have a hard winter, year, and life. Throughout the passage (364-375) they use terms from the rural vocabulary, but they use them insultingly through phrases like “Yf he wyll haue reyn he may ouerpysse yt; / Ande yf he wyll haue compasse he may ouerblysse yt / A lytyll wyth hys ars lyke” (373-5). The word “ouerblyss” mockingly turns Mankind into a clergy member, but because he is a laborer, his blessings are excrement. Through their contempt of Mankind and his work, representing all rural laborers, New Guise, Nowadays, and Nought show that they are not representatives of the rural population but rather that they represent vice through which members of rural society could fall. The vices represent temptation of worldly desires—new appearances, current trends, and idleness. The rural members of the audience, so the play suggests, must resist either resist these temptations, or if they fall, must, like Mankind, repent and receive mercy.

The audience receives a foreshadowing of Mankind’s later fall and repentance when he abuses the vices for not working and for disturbing him. He then repents his violence towards the vices and says to the audience: “Wyth my spade I wyll departe, my worschyppull souerence, / Ande lyue euer wyth labure to corecte my insolence.” (409-410). His repentance is problematic, for in the scene before he establishes that people must reject vice any way possible. Violence, while a seemingly fit way to avoid vice, is still a sin, so Mankind teaches his audience that they must repent after acting violent, even if the situation warranted it. While Mankind calls the audience his sovereigns, he is still teaching them through example, for he shows them that they must also “lyue euer

wyth *labure*” [emphasis mine] to show their repentance for sins. As his “souerence” they must better his example, so they learn that they should not only resist vices, violence, and “insolence” but also to correct or repent their failures through physical labor.

Throughout the rest of the play, Mankind uses the vocabulary of the rural population as he falls to vice, joins Mischief and the three vices, and finally repents. Once he repents to Mercy, Mercy tells the audience that Mankind was saved through Mercy’s intervention and that God, through Mercy, will forgive them all their sins if they truly repent. The audience can receive the message because the play is not only written in the vernacular but also oral, so they do not need to read it and because they connect intimately with Mankind. He represents the most common part of them, the rural workers, in his trade, his actions, and his vocabulary, so the entire audience can learn the message of redemption through God’s mercy and, hopefully, become more devout.

Rural Representation in *Piers Plowman*

Piers Plowman provides one of the best examples of rural representation and of rural vocabulary in medieval imaginative literature. In *Piers Plowman*, we can see the influence of the widespread vernacular readership of the poem. Not only is *Piers Plowman* written in English, but also it uses specialized vocabularies from many sources, including clerical, legal, and rural examples. Because enough people were literate, Langland was able to use their language and expect them to read and understand it. The variety of specialized words suggests a wide readership, both clerical and lay, and implies

that Langland expected readers of specific vocations to find a specific message in sections where he used their language. Literacy had become sufficiently widespread that groups needed and used specific terms to write about their work.

If *Piers Plowman* was intended partially for a lay audience, we must assume a lay literacy. Justice strengthens the case for a lay literacy when he claims that the three letters from the 1381 Rebellion show that “lay rural workers had begun to write and were taking part in the culture of literacy” (25). The rural workers saw the power writing had over their lives, through legal writs, law codes, etc. and were trying to capture some of that power by capturing the writing and those who wrote. Justice also suggests that *Piers Plowman* offered them a language they could use and that finally they could use that language to protest as a class, not as individuals (137-38). The connection between literacy and specialized vocabulary seems clear here. The written language had developed enough and enough people were reading (or hearing) that specific groups needed their own “language” to communicate effectively. They created technical terms and used them to explain details specific to their work. Once these terms became well known, poets like Langland could co-opt them and use them to send messages to the group in which they originated.

Justice believes the rural workers misinterpreted *Piers Plowman* when they used the poem to support their rising, but Langland’s use of the vernacular and of rural vocabulary shows that the poem did speak to the rural lay readership, and it spoke to them in their language. Throughout the poem, but in Passus V and VI especially, Langland uses

the specialized language of agrarian culture to deliver his message: following Piers the Plowman is the only way to find Truth.

Langland chose Piers to be his spokesperson because Piers was a plowman and was thus connected to Langland's rural public. Wendy Scase quotes two lines about writing as plowing from Isidore, then writes "Plowing is writing, writing is plowing: the quotations from Isidore . . . remind us that for the medievals, . . ., *verses*, lines of written poetry, are the plowman's furrows."²¹ Because the rural medievals could connect the plowing of ideas in writing with the plowing of land in farming, they could accept a character who was both a farmer and a teacher. Also, because plowing and writing were connected in the lay medieval mind, Langland could use the language of the plowman to express ideas for the rural population to follow. Piers as a plowman provided a vehicle for Langland to reach his audience, and the same vehicle—specialized language—allowed his audience to understand him.

Langland's message for his audience, both lay and clerical, rural and urban, was to follow Piers's life to find Truth. Truth, for Langland, was a construct, a personification of morals and right living; Truth was Christianity as Christ meant it to be, not as the church had made it. Scase notes that "Langland, perhaps more provocatively than any other in the period, writes verses on the fertile land between language and religion, following,

²¹Wendy Scase, "Writing and the Plowman: Langland and Literacy," *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 9 (1995) 122-23. All further references will be documented parenthetically.

Passus by Passus, the trajectory of Piers Plowman” (123). Langland uses agrarian vocabulary to develop his meaning and to convince his rural readers to accept his meaning. Their language allows him access to their beliefs, so he can suggest a religious path for them to follow.

Langland first mentions Piers when his pilgrims are searching for the house of Truth. He explains that the Plowman knows Truth as well “as clerik doth hisse bokes”²² (V.538). This line shows that Piers knows Truth, as both a character and as an abstract concept, and that he knows Truth through actual experience. The line also shows that clerics have abstract or theoretical knowledge rather than practical experience. Through the line, Langland is commenting that practice is more important than theory, and in doing so he connects clerics with books rather than with God. Piers is a representative of the Christianity, the Christian church in theory rather than as practiced, of God and of spirituality. Through his actions, rural readers can see how to live morally.

Piers is a member of the rural community, for he is a plowman who was taken to Truth by Conscience and Kinde Wit, “Bothe to sowe and to sette the while I swenke myghte” (V.541). Piers is not specifically a churchman; he is a plowman with ties to the Church, which suggests that all common people should maintain ties to the Church. Piers works for Truth, sowing seeds, planting, and toiling in his fields. The rural readers were

²²All quotations unless otherwise noted come from William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A.V.C. Schmidt (London: J.M. Dent, 1987).

familiar with these agrarian terms (“sowe,” “sette,” and “swynke”) and could relate to the plowman, Piers, who used them. He represents them and their lives, and Langland uses him and his language to reach the rural readers.

After introducing Piers as a representative of rural readers, Langland must convince his readers that Piers is worthy for them to follow. Piers tells the pilgrims, and thus Langland tells his readers, that he has followed Truth for forty years and

Bothe ysowen his seed and suwed hise beestes,
Withinne and withouten waited his profit,
Idyke[d] and id[o]lve, ido that he hoteth.
Som tyme I sowe and som tyme I thresshe,
In taillours craft and tynkeris craft, what Truthe kan devyse,
I weve and I wynde and do what Truth hoteth. (V.543-48)

When Piers lists the work he has done for Truth, rural readers can see that he does represent them. Piers is not noble, not clerical; he is common, a worker who earns his living. Piers also represents the commons through his language, for he uses their words, a rural vocabulary, to show who he is and what work he has done. He has “ysowen” for Truth, cared for Truth’s livestock (“suwed hise beestes”), and plowed Truth’s fields (“Idyke[d] and id[o]lve”). Piers works the land; he is related to the rural readers and they will follow him where they would not follow characters representing the Church or the nobility. The pilgrims join Piers, as do a cutpurse, wafer-seller, pardoner, and a prostitute. This group is diverse, yet Piers represents them all, for their language is often rural; also,

Piers has followed many crafts, like the “taillours” and the “tynkeris.” He truly represents all of the laboring classes. By having such a diverse group join Piers, Langland indicates that he wants his lay audience to join Piers as well.

When rural readers discover the work Piers has done for Truth, they remember again that Piers is connected to the Church. When he says he has sowed Truth’s seed (V.543), Piers alludes to working for Christ and sowing the seeds of Christianity in the characters present. Through Piers, readers can see Langland invoking his public’s ideological horizon of expectations through the allusion to the parable of the sower. Those members of the public whose ideological horizon of expectations include the parable can see that Langland is showing them how to live, through the life of his character Piers. Most rural readers would be familiar with the parables and would recognize them in Piers’s description. They would also recognize Truth as Christ and connect Piers to Him. Piers has sown and threshed for the Church (V.546), meaning he serves God. Because Piers uses the agrarian terms to show his missionary work, the rural readers can understand and accept him.

The pilgrims decide to go find Truth’s house, but do not think they can follow Piers’s directions without a guide. Piers says “I have an half acre to erie by the heighe weye;/ Hadde I eryl this half acre and sowen it after,/ I wolde wende with you and the wey teche” (VI.4-6). Like Mankind, who as seen above rejects vice and leisure because he has a duty to the land and the people of England, Piers places his duty to the land and to the people who live off of his work before his quest. He shows the audience—both the

pilgrims and the rural readers—that one must have one’s worldly affairs in order before one makes a pilgrimage. By setting an example for the audience, Piers “wende[s]” with them and “the weye teche[s].” He is teaching them how to live in the world.

Langland’s use of “wende” is interesting, for while he uses the term to mean “go,” in Anglo-Saxon it meant “to turn,” “to direct” or “to go one’s way.” It is a verb that shows more than going; it implies guiding or teaching. “Wende” still carries its former meaning that includes guiding or teaching along with going, but when Piers uses it, it also gains a new meaning: turning soil before planting. Furthermore, when Piers uses “wende” with agrarian terms, he causes the word to gain a religious meaning; the pilgrims’ lives are the soil he is plowing (turning) to plant seeds of truth. When those seeds have grown, he can harvest them and the pilgrims will be ready to know Truth. He will have guided them to Christianity.

Langland has the pilgrims decide to help Piers so that he will lead them to Truth, and through their example, to lead Langland’s public to follow Piers’ life. Piers dresses to plow, and Langland again uses agrarian terminology when he describes Piers’s clothes which helps coerce rural readers into accepting Piers as their representative. Piers “caste on [hise] cloths, yclouted and hole, / [Hise] cokeres and [hise] coffes for cold of [hise] nailes, / And [heng his] hoper at [his] hals in stede of a scryppe:” (VI.59-61). Piers, in his torn, common, work clothes looks like the rural readers. He is not a lord dictating their duties, nor is he a churchman preaching beliefs they should follow; Piers is one of them who is teaching them through example, and thus they agree to work with him.

Piers teaches the pilgrims and Langland's rural readers by saying "A busshel of bred corn brynge me therinne, / For I wol sowe it myself, and sithenes wol I wende / To pilgrimage as palmeres doon, pardon for to have" (VI.62-64). By saying he will sow the seed himself, Piers shows his audience that he will work and that he must work before he can receive a pardon—Grace. Furthermore, Piers represents all workers, so the lines suggest that anyone who seeks salvation (a pardon) through pilgrimage should finish their worldly duties first; the rural readers themselves should and must fulfill their duties to the land before they seek salvation. In case the audience misses his message, Piers says "And whoso helpeth me to erie or sowen here er I wende, / Shal have leve, by Oure Lord, to lese here in hervest / And make hym murie thermyd, maugree whoso bigruccheth it" (VI.65-67). With these words, Piers exhorts his audience to help him, to work the land as he does, and to eventually receive salvation.

Through Piers's speech, Langland reveals two things. He shows that labor at one's job is beneficial and in a sense noble; one cannot expect food without working for it. Langland also shows his audience how to live according to the Church. He has already established Piers as a potential churchman (and later as a Christ figure), so the rural readers, familiar with the New Testament, would recognize the allusion to Christ: they are to help sow the seeds of Christianity, to live as Christians, and to do the work their station in life requires of them. If they do so, they will rejoice at harvest time—they will receive salvation. Langland reemphasizes this idea later in the Passus when Hunger says, "And if the gomes grucche, bidde hem go swynke, / And he shal soupe sweeter whan he it hath

deserved” (VI.216-17). Literally, Hunger refers to beggars not working; figuratively, he refers to salvation—he tells the audience they must work now to receive salvation later.

Langland teaches his public through example when Piers writes his will. The will is written in a rural vocabulary, and shows Langland’s audience how to worship and how to work. After Piers explains what he will leave to the Church, his wife, and children, Piers vows

I wol worshiþe therwith Truthe by my lyve,
And ben His pilgrym atte plow for povere mennes sake.
My plowpote shal be my pikstaf, and picche atwo the rotes,
And helpe my cultour to kerve and clense the furwes. (VI.101-04)

In this vow, Piers shows the audience that he is one of them through his language. He is a “pilgrim atte plow” and uses a “plowpote” instead of a pike—he is a farmer, not a warrior. The agrarian language shows that Piers, unlike Mankind, uses peaceful means to achieve his ends, to “kerve and clense the furwes.” He is working for God without belonging to a warrior class and without taking holy orders. Instead, he uses his agrarian accouterments to “weed” out sinners and liars who offend Truth. With the vow, Piers shows the audience that they do not need to devote themselves to Church-life in order to be saved. Instead, they can devote themselves to Truth and can live with him, keeping Truth in their lives. Even if they are simple plowmen, like Piers, they can still serve Truth and help guide others. If they live with Truth, they will serve the Church as Piers does; they will be lay workers connected to the Church.

One way members of the rural community can serve the Church is through labor, which also serves society and perpetuates the estates prevalent at the time. After Piers has worked awhile, he goes to see how the pilgrims are working. Many have stopped, and Piers chastises them. Some pretend to be lame or to be beggars, but Piers won't believe they cannot work. Instead, he says "Ye wasten that men wynnyn with travaille and with tene; / Ac Truthe shal teche yow his teme to dryve, / Or ye shul eten barly breed and of the broke drynke" (VI.133-35). Piers tells the pilgrims, thus Langland tells his readers, that when they refuse to work they are a burden on society. He exhorts them to be honest through the metaphor of driving Truth's team, and he tells them they will eat poorly if they lie. Driving a team refers to controlling a team of horses or oxen, either in front of a wagon or to plow a field. Langland's rural readers would have been familiar with the term, and they would have understood the metaphor clearly. Because Langland uses their language, the readers would be more likely to accept his advice and follow Piers's example. By using the metaphor, Langland co-opts agrarian language once more, and he uses it specifically to remind his rural audience to work hard if they want rewards—either worldly or Heavenly.

In a sense, the agrarian language of the metaphor "Truthe shal teche yow his teme to dryve" criticizes the church while it teaches the laity. The beggars Piers criticizes probably represent the mendicant friars, churchmen who begged because they had taken a vow of poverty.²³ Piers, however, sees these beggars eating well and living well at the

²³Scase discusses this possibility in her work *Piers Plowman and the New Anti-*

expense of others. They have warped their vow and the teachings of the Church and feed off of workers rather than earning their own way. Langland, through Piers, tells them to reform, suggesting that if they do not reform themselves, someone else will reform them. Because Langland uses agrarian language and this Passus is mostly agrarian, readers might assume who will reform the misbehaving churchmen: the commons. Langland's common readers did find the message to reform the clergy, but his *audience* apparently misunderstood the message he wrote for his *public*. In 1381, rebels attacked clergy, the clerks, and the nobles, and their leaders carried letters that referred to *Piers Plowman*. Langland revised the poem later, suggesting that the rebels had mis understood and misappropriated his poem.

Conclusion

The message Langland included for his entire public was to live honestly and to follow the teachings of Christ; he did not, however, suggest that people should attack those who did not follow his advice. Langland clearly states his message at the end of Passus VI, after the Wastrels have defeated Hunger and have returned to their lazy ways. In this Passus, the readers receive a warning. This warning is in first person, but is not spoken by a character: it may be from the dreamer, it may be from Langland—it is the

clericalism. In this work, Scase discusses the perceived misdeeds of the friars and how they appear as satire in *Piers Plowman*. Wendy Scase, *Piers Plowman and the New Anti-clericalism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1989) 16-22.

voice of prophecy. The source of the warning does not matter, so long as readers realize that it is personal, that someone is speaking directly to them.

The warning begins with the voice telling workmen to gather food while they can because “Hunger hiderward hasteth hym faste!” (VI 320-21); this warning is particularly effective because farmers know hunger ensues whenever their crops fail. Hunger is returning to chastise the wasters and “er fyve yer be fulfilled swich famyn shal aryse” (VI 323). This famine will include floods, foul weather, and failed crops (VI 324) and will last until “deeth withdrawe and derth be justice, / And Dawe the Dykere deye for hunger” (VI 328-29). The voice predicts the famine in the language of the workers; farmers and herders would be concerned with foul weather and crop failure more than lords or clergy. Langland uses agrarian terms to explain the famine so that those most affected by it would understand the message. However, all people could understand the warning, for Langland wrote in simple terms and in the vernacular, so educated, noble, and ecclesiastical readers could also receive the message: all people should obey god’s laws or everyone will starve.

The prophetic voice also claims that the famine will continue until “God of his goodnesse graunte us a trewe” (VI 330). By mentioning God, Langland returns the Passus to a religious theme. Now, the wasters are those who violate church law and may be anyone. The rural readers, through the agrarian terminology, realize that they must live with Truth to avoid the famine and to receive God’s Grace. As they gather their food—perhaps good deeds in this context—they are to remember who they should follow: Piers.

Piers has been their guide throughout the Passus, and the use of the specialized rural vocabulary at the end of the Passus should remind the readers of that. They are to emulate him, to work and follow Truth, and if they do, they will receive Grace.

AFTERWORD

Through the figures of Piers and Mankind, the authors invoke their audiences' horizon of expectations, showing the ideological values members of the rural community held and providing guides for all the English people to follow. While not all rural people lived like Piers and Mankind—and not all the clergy, nobility and legal community behaved as depicted—the authors choose these characters from the common people for a reason. Their vocabulary can be understood by the entire public and their language, the vernacular, is common to that public. The characters can represent all English people because they meet the lowest common factor.

Piers Plowman is more than just a figurative penitential manual showing people how to live their lives according to the author's morals. It is also comical, revealing much about characters, community knowledge, and the historical life of the medieval people. But it does instruct its public how to live properly. Bakhtin and Medvedev write, "Whatever plot or motif we choose, we always reveal the purely ideological values which shape its structure. If we disregard these values, if we place man immediately into the material environment of his productive existence—that is, if we imagine him in a pure, absolute, ideologically unrefracted reality—nothing of the plot or motif will remain."¹ By choosing the ideological value of morality to be a lens for *Piers Plowman*, modern

¹Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Pavel N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics*, trans. Albert J. White (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 17.

readers can see the morals of the time reflected and refracted. As they interpret the poem through the ideology of the medievals, they can come to appreciate the poem more.

The morality lesson in *Piers Plowman* speaks to modern readers partly because modern cultural ideology still resembles that of medieval England in some ways. The lesson also speaks to modern readers because the vernacular, Middle English, is related to modern English. Many of the words, phrases, professions, and professional vocabularies are used today, making the poem important in a modern context.

While the representatives of the legal profession discussed in Chapter Three and the technical vocabularies discussed in Chapter Four provide insight into the understanding of medieval literature generally and *Piers Plowman* specifically, the discussion need not be limited to legal and rural settings. By viewing medieval literature through the lens of the medievals' ideological horizon of expectations, modern readers can discover what all classes, professions, and localities might have thought or valued and what other areas of society thought about them. Research into mercantile and noble representation, whether through vocabularies or people would prove fruitful in *Piers Plowman*, as seen in Passus II through VII.

Equally as interesting as the legal and rural vocabularies and representations used in *Piers Plowman*, and possibly the most obvious specialized vocabulary that appears in the poem, is that of the clergy; Langland includes Latin passages from the Bible and church fathers that most of his public would have been unable to read. He then has characters restate these passages in English, allowing his public to understand the passage

but still not to know the Latin—unless they heard it read and recognized it from church. When Langland does not translate the Latin passages, he provides commentary on the passage from one of the characters. He does this when the Latin quotes are common ones from church, passages most readers would know when they heard them. The problem here is that for readers to know what the passage says, they have to know Latin—implying a possibly wider oral readership. The commentary provided often does not translate the passages completely or offer the same commentary one might hear in church. Because of the differences, readers would pay more attention to both messages. Looking at these Passes (VIII-XII) would allow modern critics to see how the medieval English clergy operated and how the vernacular public perceived them.

Piers Plowman is not the only work in which the ideological horizon of expectations can provide insight. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains ample evidence of technical vocabulary, including noble, hunting, and perhaps mercantile vocabularies. Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, also uses technical vocabularies, including mercantile in “The Shipman’s Tale,” ecclesiastical in “The Parson’s Tale” and “The Pardoner’s Tale,” and noble in “The Knight’s Tale,” to help develop his characters and expand his public. Further research into these poems and others, both older and newer, will help modern readers understand the medieval world and allow them to appreciate the literature more. Through the specialized vocabularies and by considering the medieval ideological horizon of expectations, modern readers can find new and insightful interpretations of texts.

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